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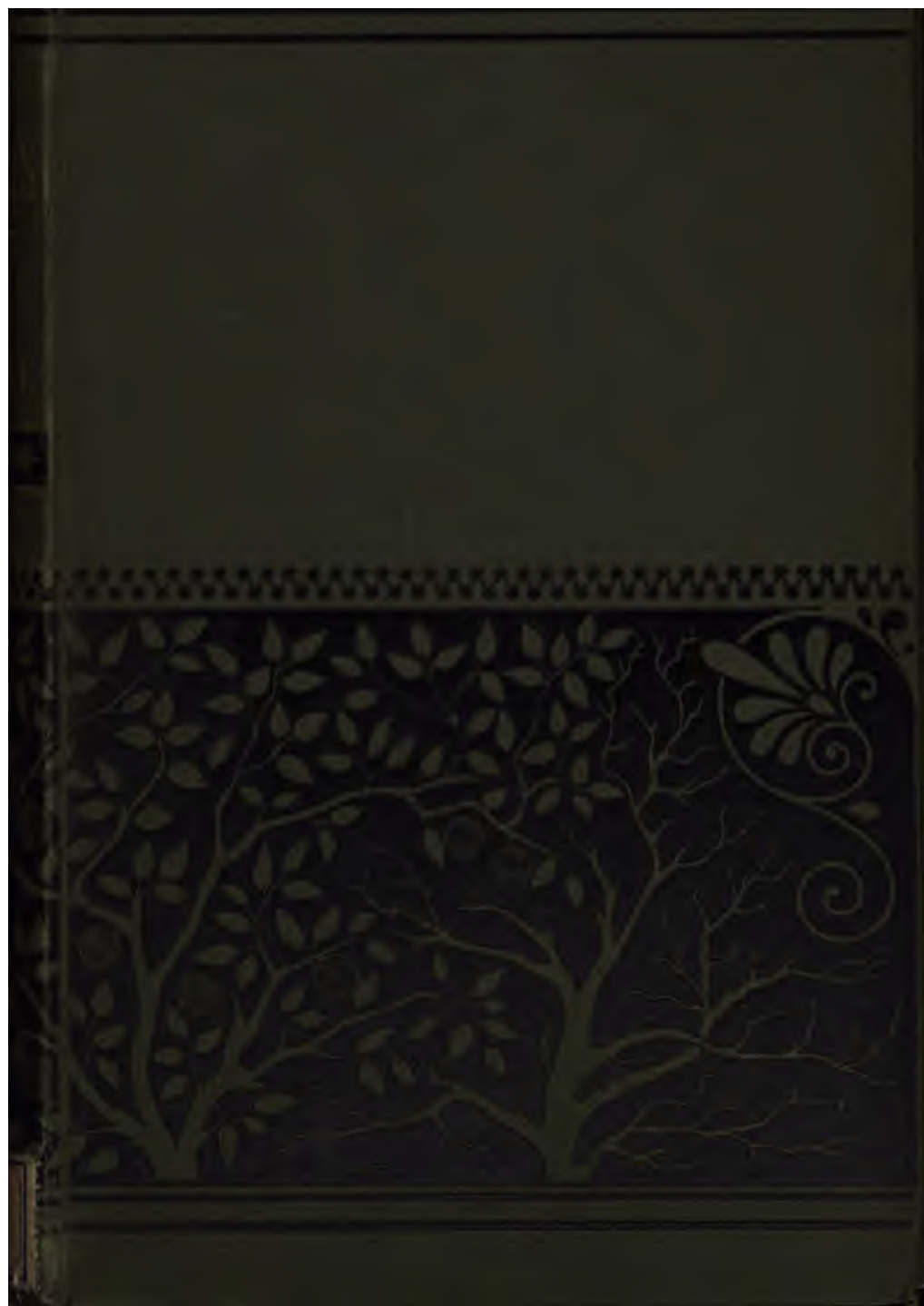
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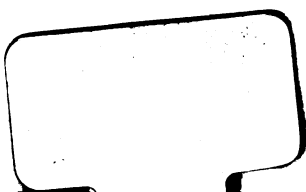
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A MOTHER'S IDOL

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A MOTHER'S IDOL

BY

LYDIA HOPE

"And hence one master-passion in the breast,
Like Aaron's serpent, swallows up the rest."—POPE.

In Three Volumes

VOL. III.



LONDON:

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A MOTHER'S IDOL.

CHAPTER I.

MORE THAN I COULD BEAR.

PREVIOUS to the prisoners' entrance, Mrs. Davenel introduced me to several of her friends, a few of whom, however, I had met before in The Chase drawing-room and at Lady Garth's. The pitch of nervousness to which I was now worked up did not stupefy, but rather quickened my intellect, so I said and did all that was requisite, and, I believe, gave satisfaction to the proud mother, who was so anxious that her little world should think her son had not thrown himself away. Just after I had been answering some questions about Captain Davenel's health, made me by one of the ladies, and when all eyes were turned to the poor actors in the pitiful drama now to be played before us, I perceived Mr. Stewart coming in, stopping to

greet first one and then the other, as he made his way towards us. He looked much as usual—at least the outer world would have thought him so; but I saw a change in him—the lines round the mouth more fixed and rigid, and in his expression less of the brightness which was its usual characteristic. After the one first glance at him I sat perfectly still, looking straight before me, my hands pressed tightly the one within the other. It was almost unbearable to have to meet him coldly, and as if he were a stranger, when I remembered so vividly how it had been with us in our last meeting.

Mrs. Davenel was next the judge, then came her husband, and then I. The place near me was vacant, and was evidently designed and kept for Mr. Stewart, who, after he had shaken hands with us all, and had spoken to Mr. and Mrs. Davenel, had no choice but to seat himself in it. I did not look at him, and speech was impossible to me. I knew Mrs. Davenel was observing us closely; I knew that, for the look of the thing, I ought to talk to him; but I felt how impossible commonplaces were between us. I then realised, as I had never been able to do before, that Mr. Stewart was right when he said we had best not meet, when he tried to shorten as much as he could this one inevitable meeting.

He was the first to break the silence.

"Do you feel at all nervous, Muriel? I remember your telling me once how you dreaded having to be a witness——"

He must have wonderful self-control; or was it that he felt less than I did? His voice and manner were just as they used to be months ago; they were calm, kind, friendly, and, if there was some slight restraint in them, I am sure it was only perceptible to me. I still looked fixedly before me, still pressed my hands closely together, as I answered:

"I do not feel in the least nervous, thank you, and it will soon be over." My companion sighed, I thought, but could not be quite sure, and said no more. Mrs. Davenel, reassured as she saw how little we spoke to one another, and how quiet, almost indifferent we seemed, was becoming entirely absorbed with the trial, which was now proceeding. She transfixed her wretched *ci-devant* footman with a stony glare, which, I believe, aggravated to him the terrors of his position. Mr. Davenel was also intent on what was going on; I seemed to be the only one who gave little heed to what was around me. But when at last I glanced towards Mr. Stewart, and marked his compressed lips and resolute expression, then I knew it was hard for him also,

and that I was not the only sufferer. Our eyes met. Long afterwards he told me the dumb agony in mine, like some hurt animal, was almost more than he could bear, and made him fear lest I should lose my self-control. He knew that he must bring some of his old influence into force to help me, so he relaxed the coldness of his manner. He remembered I was but young, that it was more difficult for me to be strong than it was for him.

"Dear Muriel," he whispered, in so low a voice that no one near us could hear him, "you must try and look differently. I would fain have spared you this meeting if I could, but I could not. Would it help you if I went farther from you?"

"No," I answered, "be as near me as you can while you are here. I did not know till last Sunday that we should meet, and ever since then I have been so longing for this. It seems as if I had you back from the other world; I have been trying to think of you as dead. I never hoped to see you again, never again, and now that I have you once more there is so much I want to say to you. I am always thinking my thoughts for you, always wanting to tell you everything, to have your advice and help. May we not have one short half hour together? There could be no wrong in it

and it would be the very last. It would do me such good."

I was very wrong and selfish, and yet I did not know that I was, till I saw in Faulkner's face how much he was suffering, how hard I was making it for him to do right. I was putting his good resolutions to so cruel a test, tempting him to that which was unwise, imprudent. At last I understood this; and then, for his sake, and because I loved him so, I said :

"But you are right; I cannot feel it now, but I shall by-and-by, and because of my faith in you, it shall be as you wish, and as you decide."

If anyone despises me for my previous weakness, let him at least give me the credit of my faith in the noble nature of this man—a faith which, though I was still at heart rebellious and undisciplined, made me acquiesce in what was right; made me, like one groping in the dark, follow after the light of duty which he held before me.

A brighter expression now came into his face. "I knew you would try to see things as they ought to be; I have such faith in you too, dear Muriel. I long for one short half hour with you as much as you do, but just because we so long for it, it must not be. Courage, sweet one, have

courage to the end. Remember, if you give way I shall blame myself still more keenly for the weakness, the want of self-control, which made me throw this pain into your life. You will never know how I blame myself as it is."

I made no further effort after this. For his dear sake I resolved I would not add one feather's weight to his unhappiness by my own wilfulness. Yet how I still longed and craved just for a few minutes with only him near me, and in which I could be myself with him! But he was right, was nobly right, so I acquiesced.

After a while he began speaking about other things. He talked of my mother, saying how glad he was she was at The Chase; and then he spoke of Horace, and by-and-by we were conversing much as usual, his self-control influencing and nerving me at least for the present. I told him my mother had promised to stay on with Mr. Davenel and Anastasia for a few days after we went abroad—"So, if you go to The Chase soon, you will meet her. I want you to know her," I concluded.

"I, too, wish very much to meet her, and perhaps I shall do so," he said; "but my work is not a pretence, as kind old Mr. Davenel asserts it is. One of my friends is ill. His business is some Government

work I understand very well, so I have been chosen to fill his place while he is recruiting. I really had difficulty in getting leave of absence to come here."

"I am very glad you are busy," I said. "I feared you had very little to do, and I know occupation makes you happier." Then looking closer at his face I started as I asked: "Have you been well? At first I thought you much as usual, but now I see you do not look well."

"Yes, I have been quite sufficiently so—you know work and I agree thoroughly well together. I mean to throw plenty of it into my life."

I thought to myself how I would have loved to share a life which struggled bravely, rather than have the soft luxury which would be mine. It would have been the real rest to me to live in his work, to look up to him, and trust in him. I could have been so proud of him, could have been so ambitious for him, would have tried to have been his real helpmeet. But these thoughts must not be pursued now, if ever; so I spoke of Kitty—that theme we both loved so well, and on which we could be so unconstrained, so really cheerful.

He then told me he would most likely leave England in May, "therefore it will not be so very

long before I send Kitty to you. You will be glad of that."

"Very," I said with emphasis. "More glad of that than of anything in the whole world."

He gave me one quick look, then proceeded:

"I have accepted a very good post, and I believe it is considered a compliment its having been given to me. The income is far larger than I have yet received. You see," he added somewhat bitterly, "my good fortune has come at last, and has come too late."

It was the only shadow of complaint he made, but it told volumes.

"Where will your work be?" I asked.

"Not so very far away this time. Canada will be my home for the next 'five years' servitude.' It opens a new world to me, as I have never been there before."

"Surely it will be more healthy and nicer for you than India or Africa?"

"I have never thought much about the health part of it," he said. "All places are much the same to me in that respect, and health means so much more how we live than where we live. Besides, I am pretty tough wherever I am; so, little one, you need never fidget about me." He gave me one of his

dear smiles, then drawing my attention to what was going on, said : " I fancy the time is approaching in which you must be summoned into that curious-looking box. I wish I could spare you this small ordeal."

" I don't mind it so much now you are here," I said.

This was perfectly true ; he could do me no good, could give me no help, and yet his mere presence imparted to me the courage I might otherwise have lacked. So when I was in the witness-box I answered my questions quite composedly, feeling singularly unflurried, and found it all very easy. It was an effort to have to confess that my first fear had been of ghosts, but I kept back nothing, even though it might cause ridicule. I only volunteered one statement, and that was that I thought the man who had spoken to me more gently than the others on that night, had been an unwilling participator in the affair. Poor fellow, he gave me such a grateful look when I said this, and further evidence proving my conjecture had been right, and that he had been almost forced into the business, and was also very young, he was given the lightest punishment which could be inflicted on him.

I returned to my place a little flushed and

trembling, and was complimented on the correctness of my answers, and on my coolness. What I had just gone through did me the good turn of diverting my mind from myself, and of making me take a greater interest in what was going on. Mr. Davenel was the next witness, and, as his wife had foretold, was a most trying one. He was either unnecessarily loquacious or painfully nervous, and oscillated between the two extremes with curious indecision. His high position and his gray hairs won more patience for him than he would otherwise have received, but it was a great relief to all of us when his share in the trial was over. Mrs. Davenel sat extra stiffly when he was under cross-examination; she was much annoyed when he showed off badly in public. Certainly she would have made a far better witness, only she never could have resisted such a capital opportunity for finding fault, and I believe would have scolded judge and jury and all—would have rated them all by turns.

Mr. Stewart and I now exchanged a few more words. He congratulated me on having acquitted myself so well, and said that Mrs. Davenel had expressed herself as being quite proud of me.

"So you see, Muriel," he added, with his peculiarly sweet smile, "you are winning golden

opinions from all. I am very glad of this; I want you to be appreciated; I want you to feel you are so. It will help you so to be happier, to throw off the shade which has come over your life. I want you to forget——”

“Do you want me to forget you?” I said reproachfully.

“No, I cannot wish that; I need not. But I want your remembrance of me to be a help in your life, and not a hindrance. I want, that in time it shall be no pain to you, or else, love, I shall wish we had never met.”

I cannot describe the sadness which mingled with the courage and strength in his firm tones.

I believe it was a never-ceasing regret to Faulkner Stewart that he had lost his self-control, and so had won my secret from me. His was a nature so highly honourable that this one involuntary failure had given him the keenest pain. He would have condemned it in another man, and he did not spare himself. I read the self-reproach in his face, and said softly:

“Try and blame yourself no more. Think of me as earnestly striving to do and be as you wish. It is not easy just now, but it shall be. I am very weak and faulty, but I will think of you and your

noble words ; and I believe for all my life I shall be a better woman for having known you."

He took my hand in his and pressed it firmly, and then we were again silent. The trial was now drawing near its close. Mr. Stewart's evidence was the last given, and it sealed the fate of the wretched prisoners. I would gladly have left the court before sentence was given, but Mrs. Davenel, Dracolike to the last, was resolved on hearing Stubbs' ten years' penal servitude awarded him, and watched without pity his ashy face as he was led away.

I will give Mrs. Davenel the justice to say that she never attended trials unless she had, as in this case, a personal interest in them ; but I shrank from the hardness which could take pleasure in the chastisement even of the guilty. I could not help contrasting her coldness with the distress evinced by Mr. Davenel, and the pity which was in Mr. Stewart's face, as the hapless men left the dock.

We all rose up, and, amidst a general buzz of talk, Faulkner whispered his farewell to me.

"I must leave immediately. I have only just time to say 'Good-bye' to Kitty and to catch my train. May God bless you and be with you always!"

I could not answer him. I only looked up in his face and tried to smile and be brave, but I fear it

was a pitiful effort. Then, taking my hand from his, I let him go.

Mr. Davenel went with him to his hotel. The carriage was to come for us as soon as it was ready, and then we were to call for Mr. Davenel and Kitty on our way home. By this time the early winter darkness had set in, so the court was lit up with flaring jets of gas, and the close atmosphere was more intolerable than ever.

The judge was talking to Mrs. Davenel when he caught sight of my white face.

"Our heroic little witness is worn out, Mrs. Davenel; she shall come into my room and have a glass of wine or something. All this has been too much for her."

At any other time Mrs. Davenel would have scoffed at the mere sentimentality of minding seeing some poor wretches get the punishment they deserved, but she knew very well what it really was which so drove the blood from my cheeks.

She had forgotten me for the moment, but now came almost tenderly up to me:

"Come, my dear," she said, "Sir Francis is right; you do look ill, and as if you needed wine or rest."

"Hush!" I answered; "don't speak to me or be kind, I cannot bear it just now."

She understood, and drew back, letting the old judge himself lead me to his room and wait on me. I could bear it from a stranger, but not from her or from anyone who knew my unhappy secret. I was longing so for the carriage to come. Poor fool that I was, I was craving for the one possible glimpse of him there might yet be if we could only reach the hotel before he left it.

But alas, it was not to be. Mrs. Davenel, whether purposely or not I cannot tell, delayed at the last moment, talking with several of her neighbours over the trial, and when we drove up to the Compton Arms, I saw a cab leave it for the station: in it I knew Mr. Stewart would be. Mr. Davenel and Kitty were still on the steps under the portico, having just bid good-bye to him. The child was crying, and, when she came into the carriage, nestled close to me in the darkness. I did not repulse her; nay, I took her in my arms, letting her head rest on my shoulder. My love and comfort should never fail towards his darling, and yet I felt in my bitterness how untroubled were the soft childish tears shed by her who in a few short weeks would see him again, in comparison with the tearless agony of the woman who had perhaps looked her last on the face so inexpressibly dear to

her. I do not know whether much was said during that wretched drive home. I only know this, I could not speak. I believe Mr. Davenel began some kindly joke to me about my demeanour as a witness, and I believe Mrs. Davenel told him I had a headache and had better not talk; but I am not sure; I only know that that ten miles' drive was passed in a silent misery, greater than I had ever felt before. When we were in the hall, I turned as if to go to my own room. Mr. Davenel exclaimed, as he saw my face:

"You must be very bad, Muriel; you look awfully. You had better go to bed at once."

"Yes," I repeated mechanically, "I will go to bed at once."

Mrs. Davenel looked at me with terror. She so feared lest I should lose all control. She drew me aside, saying:

"Muriel, I know it is much to ask; but try to see Horace for five minutes, or else he will suspect. Only for five minutes, and then you shall be as much alone as you wish."

I laughed. It seemed such a mockery, this keeping up appearances always; and yet she was right—it would not do if he suspected anything.

"I will come for five minutes," I said coldly.

So I went slowly to his room. Mother was sitting with him, and Mr. Davenel, who had preceded me, was telling about the trial and me, for I caught the words—"Yes; she made a capital witness; but the court was so stifling that she has a splitting headache," as I entered.

My mother started when she saw me; but I kept so in the shade that Horace could not see much of me.

"I have a bad headache," I said quietly, "and will ask everyone to excuse me to-night. Mother knows that when I have a really bad one the only thing for me is to be quite alone."

My mother came to my rescue at once.

"Yes, poor child. She is fit for nothing when she is in pain like this; she had best be by herself."

"I wanted you to tell me all about it," said Horace irritably—it had been a bad day with him evidently, or something had put him out—"but I suppose I must wait till to-morrow. Do try to be well by then." He drew me down to him for the good-night kiss, and whispered: "I have missed you so; it has been such a long weary day. Come early to me to-morrow."

How hateful was that kiss to me! but since

Christmas Day, when he had placed that splendid ring on my finger, he had insisted on his rights as my betrothed, and I had no longer been able to gainsay him.

I promised him I would come to him soon after breakfast on the next day, and then he let me go.

When I was in my room I locked my door, and at last felt myself alone. I think I must have been half wild by then—all reason, all composure, all self-control had left me. I shame to write all this about myself, but so it was. I flung myself on the ground; I could not crouch low enough in my despair. I gave myself up to a hopeless abandonment of misery.

Presently came a knock at the door. I made no answer, trusting that, whoever it might be, would tire and go away. But no; another and another knock came, each louder than the preceding. I called out, still not moving from where I was:

“I cannot be disturbed; I wish to be alone.”

“Muriel,” said my mother pleadingly, “you must let me in.”

“I cannot,” I answered; “I will see you to-morrow, but just to-night I will have to myself.”

There was a pause. Then came the sweet voice in firmer accents:

"Muriel, my love, you must let me in ; I order you."

I laughed. It was years since my mother had ordered me to do anything—not since I was a wilful child. Did she think that, like a cowed child, I should obey her now? I must have been half mad, for I defied her—my mother, whom I had never before disobeyed—as I said I would not let her in ; that she must go away.

"Muriel," came the soft voice again, "I will stay here all night, if needs be, till you let me in."

I still waited, in the hope that she would go away. I don't know how much time passed, but she already did me this good, for I could not forget that she—my mother—was waiting out there in the cold ; so at last, in my impatience, I went to the door and flung it open, saying :

"I suppose I must let you in ; but I cannot speak to you."

I then relocked the door behind her. My mother sat down near the fire, not saying a word, and I went as far away from her as I could. She had been so frightened by the expression on my face when she saw me in Horace's room, that fearing I might be ill, she had resolved I should not be left to myself.

From time to time she replenished the fire, and

once she stepped softly up to me, wrapping a warm shawl round my shoulders; but she never attempted to break the silence. She was patiently waiting, as perhaps only a mother could wait, till the evil mood had passed, for it was an evil mood with me. I had never had such before. I pray God, against whose will I rebelled that evening, that I may never have such again. It was the worst misery of all, for it was faithless misery—it was misery without God. In all the past miserable weeks I had made Faulkner Stewart my god; and now, even his good noble words failed—they were not enough. Only Divine strength and power could raise up my poor bruised heart again, and I would not appeal to Him. In that terrible hour I hated God. I thought wicked, rebellious things concerning Him. I made desperate resolutions. I resolved I would break off this hateful engagement; that I would serve Horace Davenel as a free woman, and not as a bond: I abhorred my chains, and would show him that I did. Then I thought: Why should I go on serving him? Why should I not tell him the whole truth, and leave him for ever? What if it killed him? Was it not better that he should die at once than that I should drag on through years of wretchedness? Was not my life as much as his? I did not see that other people sacrificed themselves.

Why should I? And then I thought, would Mr. Stewart let me go to him if I did this cruelty to the man who trusted me, if I broke my plighted word? Ah! I knew he would not. I should be farther from him than ever, for he would be disappointed in me. My heart's desire would never be granted to me any-way. At last I became perfectly stupefied. No ray of hope lightened my darkness; it was the very blackness of darkness. Never before had I shut God away from me, therefore my wretchedness was complete.

I looked up to see if mother was still near the fire. I ignored her presence, yet I could not forget her altogether. She had left her chair, she had withdrawn to the farther end of the room, and she was kneeling there praying for the child who would not pray for herself. I saw she was crying, saw that in her earnest thought for me she forgot my actual presence, and then I felt sorry for her—a curious sort of sorrow, for it was outside my own despair, and seemed to have nothing to do with it, and yet this sorrow was God's way of softening my heart. He often does this, He awakens our pity for others, and so draws us from ourselves; then the crust of selfish misery being broken through, we are at last able to look up to Him, and so our trouble can be borne.

I went up to mother; I put my arm round her.

"Why do you cry, mother? Don't cry, I cannot bear to see your tears."

"And I long to see yours," she said as she turned and looked at me and saw how the first thaw had begun in my soul. She spoke no more, but pointed to a picture which hung over where we knelt. It was Guido's "*Ecce Homo*," and I saw there a greater sorrow than mine, or any earthly sorrow could be, for it was the perfect sorrow of pure self-sacrifice. My mother again bowed her head in prayer, while a deep silence came into my heart instead of the storm which had been raging there. I did not yet submit, but I no longer defied God. I had felt that my sorrow was greater than I could bear, that God had laid His cross on me in wrath; but now I saw as with a lightning flash that there must be "a needs be" even for my misery, that I was in His hands, that whether I chose it or not I must accept His will, that if I went hand-in-hand with Him it would be bearable, but that if I struggled against Him as I had just done it only made me far more wretched. I saw all this clearly, but still I was not softened. I recognised His justice, I acknowledged His power, but I could not see His love. I could not say, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."

I rocked to and fro in agony. At last I said:

"Mother, come to the fire, let us talk." My harsh tone made her raise her head in surprise. I was startled by the look of suffering in her face, and this suffering was for me. I kissed her tenderly, and it was I who first spoke.

"Mother, I am very wicked, for I do not love God. I fear Him. I think it is very horrible how He makes us poor mortals suffer. I cannot love Him."

"And yet, Muriel, He loves you."

"He has a strange way of showing it then. He hurts me where I am sorest. He tries me beyond my strength."

"Because it is only your strength you are trusting to. Let Him help you, you will then be able to bear your grief."

I shook my head in dissent. Presently I said: "Mother, I had better end all this. I had better tell the whole truth to Horace Davenel, and then you can take me away. I am not good enough to go through with the self-sacrifice. I am but a poor weak girl. My heart burns within me with misery." I burst into bitter weepings.

"My darling!" said my mother when my sobs had subsided—"my poor darling, let us look this matter fairly in the face. I knew there must come

this outbreak at last, and it is best it should. I want you to answer me this one thing: If you give up your engagements, will the doing so give you the peace you so crave for, the peace I so long for you to have?"

I longed to answer that it would. I thought intently, earnestly, and then with almost a passionate wail I cried out: "No, it will not; there is no peace for me anywhere. I should be full of remorse, I should be haunted by the remembrance of his unhappiness. Mother, can you help me in this sore strait? What would you do in my place? Ought I to break my word, or ought I to keep it?"

My mother hesitated before replying; it was great pain to her to speak words which might confirm my distress. At last she said, in so low a voice I could scarcely hear her:

"Our word once given, should be kept even to our own hurt, unless there is some good, right reason against it. If you had pledged yourself to do what was wrong, you would do well to break your word, because your duty to God is higher than your duty to man, and doing wrong is breaking your word to God. But, my child, I do not see that this pledge of yours to Captain Davenel is wrong. You gave it before you knew that another loved

you, and to break it would do the invalid, perhaps, fatal injury. If he were a strong man, I should say, by all means go to him, tell him everything. As a general rule, a woman should have no concealments from the man she is going to marry, and as a general rule she should not marry when she loves someone else. But yours is a very unusual case, and I do not see how you can give up your engagement, nor do I believe you will be the happier if you do. You will be no nearer then, to what you long for, than you are now, and instead of having the comfort which, till this evening, you say you have felt in ministering to, and helping one whom you really like, even though you do not love him, you will have the sad feeling that you have shipwrecked his life; it may be even that his trouble coming just now, when he is so ill, may cost him his life. Muriel, I have been very unhappy for you ever since I came here, for I have seen very clearly how things are. If I saw any right way for you, which could bring you happiness, how thankful I should be. But all I can do is to put everything before you. It is you who must make your choice."

"My choice!" I said starting; "you have all

this time been virtually telling me to go on with my engagement."

"Yes," said my mother earnestly, "I feel my arguments have tended that way; but still you must judge for yourself. Even our nearest and dearest cannot decide for us in a great crisis in our lives. If, on reflection, you still feel it is best to end all this, I will help you all I can. We will leave The Chase, and it shall all be as if it had never been. Only, love, weigh well the consequences first, before you decide one way or the other."

I did as mother advised. I thought deeply over the matter. On one side, I pictured to myself the crushing blow it would be to Horace to be forsaken by one whom he now looked on as his only brightness in life; I knew how it would shake his faith even in God if I deserted him. I thought of his old father and mother, and of their grief in his grief. I thought of Faulkner Stewart. I knew it would be impossible to either of us to make our happiness out of Horace's wretchedness. I knew my breaking off my engagement would take me farther from him than ever. I knew he would be disappointed when I, whom he deemed the soul of honour, whom he so unduly revered, went back from

my given word. I thought of my sweet Kitty, from whom I should be for ever parted, and felt how this would grieve her father; and then, on the other side, there was only to be considered my one poor self, who, till this unhappy evening, had found peace, even content, in taking up my life humbly, patiently, devotedly, in striving to forget self and to think of others. I remembered Faulkner Stewart's words to me, and higher than his words, I remembered the Divine example, which bids us live for Him and His creatures, and not for ourselves alone. Still, it was very hard to me to decide. "Mother, why is it," I asked, "that I rebel so this evening? why is it so much worse to me than it has ever yet been?"

"I think that unlucky interview has reopened your wound, has made you know how deep and sore it is; but one good will come to you out of this—you will feel how much better it is that for the present you should not meet the friend for whom you care too strongly. Also, love, I think you were too sure you would not fail, you had too much confidence in your own strength. You tried to do it all by yourself."

Yes, she was right; from the first I had been over confident. I had thought I needed no greater help than Mr. Stewart's noble words. I had made

him my god, and so in the very first trial I had utterly failed. I felt much humbled, for now I saw my faults clearly. I had been weak, vacillating, and had wished to be dishonourable.

I did not wish it now; and painful as was my humiliation, it was easier to bear than the previous hardness and rebellion, for through it was the feeling, the hope, that after this I might be able to strive better than I had ever done before—I might be able to try to begin from the right foundations, viz. distrust in myself and trust in God; and it might be that doing things for His sake would help me more than doing them as heretofore only for Mr. Stewart's, and because I wished to follow his advice.

My mother was very patient. I must have sat there a long, long time, looking into the fire, pondering all this, and yet she never, by word or sign, interrupted my meditation. At last I said:

“I am beginning to see it all as I have never seen it before. I have no doubt now but that I should keep to my engagement, and God helping me, I will. It will only be by His help that I shall be able to do so. He knows the why of all this better than I do, and I will try to believe He has a good reason for it all.”

Mother took me in her arms, kissing me passion-

ately. I knew in that moment that my sacrifice cost her almost as much as it did me, so much did she suffer for me. We went on talking for some time, every barrier which my reserve had raised between us for ever broken down. It was best it should be so. If girls would only go to their mothers—to their faithful wise mothers—in their heartsore griefs, life would be far more endurable for them. It would be far wiser if they would take their love troubles to them, instead of to foolish, or sometimes even bad, girl friends, who give them weak sentimental pity, and encourage them in the feelings which are not only a mistake, but are often actually wrong to indulge. Mother gave me no sentimental pity, but earnest sympathy and brave encouragement. She told me she firmly believed that patient continuance in well-doing would bring me the reward of peace, ay, even of happiness, in time.

“Mrs. Davenel is really anxious about you, and sorry for you, Muriel. She followed me out of Captain Davenel’s room, and spoke openly to me about it. She said she would herself release you from your word, but she could not sacrifice her son; and she praised the high sense of honour which she knew you

possessed, and which would make you true to your bond."

"I wonder what she would have thought of me just now?" I said penitently.

"She would only think as I do, that you have bravely overcome yourself."

"You may tell her, mother, that though I have been very miserable, I am stronger than I was, and will not fail in my promise, and to-morrow I will try and be as usual. May I be by myself for a little while, mother?—you can leave me now."

My mother saw how I longed for solitude, so left me; but, before doing so, told me she would soon return, and that then I must try to eat something, or I should be ill.

I started: "Why the dinner-hour must be long past, and you have had nothing to eat."

"As if that mattered," said mother, smiling. "I would far sooner have something to eat with you instead."

I will not write about the next half hour. I spent it in self-communing, and in thoughts too grave for utterance; but at the end of it I was calmer, more peaceful, more willing to leave my life, and what was the most difficult of all—the life of him whom I loved

—in God's hands, than I had ever been before. I had been looking on myself as a sort of heroine, as very deeply to be pitied and admired; but now the scales had fallen from my mental vision. I saw myself as I was, and that self-knowledge brought me humility. I resolved to walk step by step beneath the guidance of the One who knew my inmost heart; and doing this I knew my life would never again be more than I could bear, would never again be too difficult.

Mrs. Davenel came back with my mother; she wished herself to see how I was, and that I had every comfort. She did not stay long, nor did she say anything but commonplaces, till just as she was leaving, when she stooped and kissed me, whispering: —“Muriel, I am often cold and hard to you and everyone, but, under it all, I think most highly of you; I appreciate what you do for my son. I will always try to be good to you.”

I put my arms round her and kissed her with an affection which a few months previously would have seemed to me impossible.

“I too will try,” I replied, and then she left me.

My mother did not let me talk much more that night, nor did she leave me till after I had fallen asleep. Her dear face was the last thing my eyes

rested on, her sweet voice, as she read to me, the last sound which came to my ears ; while the perfect mother-love, to which Divine love has not shamed to compare itself, gave me the mental rest which helped to bring peace to my wounded heart.

CHAPTER II.

LEAVING ENGLAND.

I FEAR for some time past I have been too lachrymose, have perhaps dwelt too long on my own troubles; but just as I rose the morning after the assizes resolved to pack myself and my sorrow as much as possible out of my own sight, so will I try in my narrative to refer as little as possible to the thoughts, regrets, and longings which it was now the one dominant effort of my life to check and repress. I was much helped in this by surrounding circumstances. The Chase was in a state of bustle and confusion very rare in its usually well-ordered regularity. All this need not have been. The departure of only two people—for I counted for nothing in the affair—need not have caused much disturbance, but Mrs. Davenel was dreadfully put about at leaving her home, and of course put us about in her turn. We had to plan

and scheme to keep her out of Horace's room, lest her fidgetiness should react on him. It was so all-important he should not be fussed previous to a journey which was for the invalid sufficiently risky in itself, without further contrary elements being brought into play.

It was now Thursday, and we were to be off on the following Monday, were to travel by easy stages all that week till we arrived at Savona, a charming town in the Riviera, not very far from Nice. My preparations were soon complete, the pretty travelling outfit soon packed. Mr. Davenel had given me the wherewithal for that and much more, had done it so kindly, so as a matter of course, that I had no choice but to accept, though it was with great reluctance that I did so. Still, I saw that it was only in the fitness of things that Captain Davenel's betrothed should be suitably attired for the luxurious state in which we were to travel. The things I chose were very simple, that being my taste, but very perfect and complete. How I wished mother to share in some of my new wealth. The bright sovereigns burned in my pocket as I longed to transfer them to hers; but mother would not. She matched me in that sort of pride and independence. However, I outwitted her—pur-

chased some pretty and useful things, which were to await her return to Durnford; and the pleasure these gifts gave me was, I knew, far greater even than hers would be in receiving them.

I was very sorry, as far as I was concerned, that there was to be no roughing in our foreign life. I was so active and healthy, and felt how even a walking tour would have been infinitely more charming than the travelling made easy, which was to be our fate. The courier would save us all thought and trouble about journeys, hotels, and expenses. The ladies' maid was to spare all fatigue in packings and unpackings. Not only were rooms pre-engaged along the route, but saloon carriages kept for us on the line. I believe Mr. and Mrs. Davenel would have chartered a special steamer for their son's benefit, only that might have really been neither so safe nor so comfortable as the mail boat. Our doctor was to accompany us as far as Paris, and farther if necessary. The most luxurious and lightest built carriage, and the best horses in The Chase stables, were already on their way, and would be all ready to meet us at the Savona Station.

There, a charming villa had been chosen for us, which we were to inhabit for two or three months, by which time the benefit of the Savona air would be

supposed to be exhausted; and we were to drift into fresh pastures in pursuit of health.

All this would sound very delightful to those who have had to travel with a too close attention to economy. "How charming to have no trouble!" they would say; but I hold a different opinion. Firstly, we were not without trouble after all, for to set all this wealthy machinery in action demanded much thought and arrangement; secondly, it took the zest from travelling to have all the personal effort taken out of it. I began at last to feel as if I were only a well-dressed puppet, to be helped in and out of comfortable carriages at stated intervals, not expected to exert myself in anything; in fact, to be done for in every sense of the word.

However, I resolved within myself that every morning, if possible, I would secure an hour or two of precious freedom; my early rising would make this easy to me; and released momentarily from my golden chains, I would wander about in whatever foreign place we chanced to be, thus taking in a morning's draught of fresh air and fresh ideas, which would I trusted brace me for the whole day.

Mrs. Davenel made a misery of everything. The courier would be sure to swindle them—those people always did; and the assurance that he would keep

the monopoly of the cheating, allowing no one else to cheat excepting himself, which was the only comfort Horace gave her, was no comfort at all. I found out to my amazement that this tall strong woman, who ruled her domestics with a rod of iron, who with merciless eyes watched the unhappy Stubbs sentenced to terrible punishment, who had seemed to me a combination of inflexibility and hardness, proved herself the veriest coward in her dread of what we might encounter in our travels. Steamers would certainly blow up; trains crash and consequently smash; hotels take fire and consume their inmates; sudden revolutions burst out in Republican France, which would imperil the lives of innocent travellers. There was nothing which Mrs. Davenel did not dread, no evil which she was unprepared for; and worst of all was her certainty that all must and would go wrong during her absence from home.

Anastasia at last had recourse to a note-book and pencil, and used despairingly to jot down the fresh rules every quarter of an hour poured into her ears. She showed the book to her brother and me on the last evening as she sat with us. With, for her, a wonderful method, she had numbered these various directions for her temporary reign.

"Look!" she said, with despair, "I have got

up to one hundred and fifty-nine already. How can I remember them all? Must I read them once every morning?" and she wrung her hands in dismay.

"Burn the book as soon as our backs are turned," was Horace's advice.

"Burn the book!" ejaculated Anastasia, with horror. "I would never dare do that. She will be sure to ask to see it when she comes back, and will go over every item."

"Well, forget the rules at any rate. You just manage the best you can, and do it your own way."

"But I have no way; I never had, and you will none of you be here to help me." Anastasia looked ready to cry.

"Leave it all to Mrs. Tirrit. It would be far better if my mother would do so," remarked Horace.

Seeing Anastasia was really very perturbed, I went and sat by her, and we looked together over the formidable book. I was able to show her that many of the regulations were repetitions, and so only dummies as it were. We were weeding out those which need not be attended to, when in came Mrs. Davenel with a whole pile of fresh ones, so complex and bewildering that I began to feel Horace's

counsel to burn the book to ashes was the best after all.

I taught Kitty up to the very last day, and was deeply sorry to give up my loved occupation. The new governess had arrived—a gentle meek-looking widow, with weak eyes, who would not in the least have been capable of ruling a wilful headstrong child; but docile little Kitty took to her as much as she could to anyone in the midst of her distress at parting with us; a distress which could only be pacified by the reminding her that her father—ah me!—would be early next week at The Chase. He and mother would therefore meet after all, for she had promised to stay a fortnight longer in Northshire. I was very glad she had—first, mother would be a real help to Anastasia; secondly, I did wish the two people I loved best in the world to know, and, I hoped, to value each other.

And now came the last morning. It was happily a fine day, though there were signs of an approaching change in the weather; and we all felt how lucky we were to escape the frost and snow so evidently impending.

Horace was very depressed at breakfast. "I wonder if I shall ever see the old Chase again?" he said despondently.

"Of course you will," was my reply; "you only want two or three years away from these horrid east winds and fogs to become quite strong."

"So they all say, and so too I sometimes feel; but then at other times, as now, such a feeling of depression comes over me. I could almost call it a presentiment, only that's a folly I won't indulge in. I have often sneered at the old place, Muriel, but nevertheless it has grown into my heart, and I do not like to leave it; then I know it can't be helped, but all this fuss is hateful to me. I do think it might all have been done more quietly. If it were not for you I would sooner have stayed at home, and died here."

I felt so sorry for him as I looked at his weary face. I went and knelt near him, laying my hand on his arm.

"Dear Horace," I said, "you must not speak in that way, it pains me. We all wish you so to get strong; and even if, as you often fear, you may never be quite so—though I hope you will—still there is, I trust, much interest, and usefulness, and happiness yet to come into your life. For my sake, try to like things more than you do. Remember I have never been abroad before, and I look to you to make it pleasant for me. You are the only

one of us who knows anything about all the wonderful places we are going to see."

His face brightened as he listened to me. "There is nothing I would not do for your sake, sweet one, so I will try to like things more. I suppose it is really a proof I am stronger, this hating so the being taken care of and fidgeted about. I would just like to set off, you and I alone, and no one near us at all. I am sure I should then get better; but this travelling *en masse* makes it such a cumbrous affair altogether. I believe my poor mother is going through a perfect agony in leaving home. It was as good as a comedy to see her distressed face all yesterday."

"I did not see much comedy in it," I answered half laughing. "Poor old lady, she is really putting great constraint on herself to hide from you how she feels leaving home."

"That's the worst of it," he rejoined pettishly. "Why should people sacrifice themselves for others, or rather for me, for in this case I suppose I am the Moloch you are all bowing down to? Certainly self-sacrifice does not set easily on my mother; it spoils the small scrap of good temper left to her. She would have worried Anastasia into a nervous fever if we had stayed any longer. But I must

stop, for you never like me to speak so. Muriel, since I have seen your mother, I have understood you much better. You are the result of her teaching, she has set high and not low aims before you all your life, and you have been an apt pupil."

"Have you been able to read all that in mother?"

I said, my eyes brightening, and my face flushing with pleasure. "Horace, I am glad you like mother so. I want you always to be friends with her." And then, reverting to what he had spoken of previously, I added: "Please don't talk of our sacrificing ourselves in going abroad. I don't sacrifice myself at any rate, I have always wished to travel; it will do me a world of good."

I was beginning to feel that it would. I was becoming most thankful for this opportune change, which would remove me from associations so fraught with pain. Horace was very pleased to hear me say I was glad to go—I had not been able to do so before—and the thought it was giving me pleasure did him good. I saw he was disliking the feeling that everything was being done for him while he could do nothing for anyone, and I wondered if it was his love for me which was raising him out of his usual egotism. I continued:

"Yes; you do not know what it will be to me to

see everything new about me. Will you manage for me, Horace, that I may sometimes go about quite alone? Before you are up, and when we are in quiet places, may I go out without a maid or any fuss, just where I like? I shall come back with such quantities to tell you. You see all our travelling is to be such luxury that that little bit of early morning independence will prevent my becoming a lazy fine lady. Will you manage this for me with your mother?"

"Of course I will," he said; "but I believe you can do as much with my mother as I can now. I think she is growing quite fond of you."

I shook my head at this very impossible notion; but, as he evidently liked the idea, I did not further contradict him. Just then we heard Mrs. Davenel's voice outside, giving some last monitions to Hughes before she bustled in, already bonneted and cloaked for the journey.

"Why, Muriel, not ready yet? Do, my dear, go and put on your things at once. And have you seen Anastasia yet? I have not, I am sure, sufficiently impressed on her the rules of that clothing club; there is just time to repeat them, and there are a dozen things besides."

"My dear Madam Davenel," drawled Horace,

“it is just three-quarters of an hour to starting time, and Muriel never takes any more than five minutes to put on that little fur jacket of hers; but I will let her go now to have a last talk with her mother. As for you, if you don’t calm yourself, you will fret yourself and everyone else into an illness.”

Mrs. Davenel immediately sat down, with a sort of enforced composure, when her son spoke. I made her give me her messages, and, having delivered them, ran to my room. I flung open the window, and, unheeding the cold, stood out on the terrace to take one last glimpse of my beloved ocean. I wondered much when and how I should see it again, and how it would be with me and those whom I loved. My heart quailed at the unknown future; and then I remembered that God knew it, and so in the best way of all it was known. It was an unspeakable comfort that thought, that this was not a chance world I lived in, but that He guides and directs everything; that it must, in one sense, always be well with me if I committed my way to Him.

I stretched my hands as if in farewell to the scene I loved so dearly; then turning, saw my dear mother and Kitty standing within the window, watching me.

After a few last words we all went into the hall,

and there exchanged "Good-byes." To my surprise, Mrs. Davenel showed real feeling at the last. She had never before been parted from her husband, and I could see she did not like it at all. But still, amidst all her softening there were charges and directions even as she stepped into the carriage; and our last glimpse of Anastasia and her father showed them standing with worried, perturbed, puzzled faces under the portico as the final mems were being inscribed in the note-book.

I have not much to say about our journey. We had a rough crossing from Folkestone. Horace did not suffer, which was a great mercy; but Mrs. Davenel did to an abnormal extent, and was reduced to a pitiable state of limpness by continued sea-sickness. She fully thought she was going to die, and did not like the idea of it. All her dignity vanished, and in its place there was only to be seen a very battered, dilapidated old lady. Ropes and I, who had each suffered moderately, supported her to the deck on our arrival at Boulogne, the stewardess following with our small effects. Horace smiled, and I could not help doing so also when I noticed the woebegone object presented by his usually stately mother, as, heedless of everything and everybody, she staggered into the carriage awaiting us.

She did not speak till we were installed in the

comfortable rooms assigned to us at the hotel; but when at last she broke silence her manner was solemn and impressive in the extreme.

"Horace, I thought I should never see you again. I nearly died!" And she really believed she had been almost in a moribund condition.

However, the next morning, when we started for Paris, she was quite herself again. We were a very quiet travelling-party. Horace, fatigued by the unwanted exertion, dozed a good deal. Mrs. Davenel took very little interest in anything save him; and the doctor—wise man—made frequent incursions into the smoking compartments. Our courier—a great success—was a dapper little fellow with dark hair and eyes, Swiss originally, but so transfused into different nationalities that his own nativity had been almost lost sight of. There are couriers and couriers I believe, and some are very nasty, but we had chanced on a good specimen. If he did cheat us he did it very comfortably. He took a great interest in our invalid, and was devoted to me, I suppose because I was a better hand at languages than the rest of the party. I used at last to act as interpreter between him and Mrs. Davenel, who would profess she could not understand his French. I think she missed the good English accent she was so used to.

I found much interest in looking out of the window, even at the dull wintry-looking landscape, but it was so wonderful to me to feel I was abroad at last, and even the commonest things which differed a little from what I had seen at home possessed for me the charm of novelty.

Near Abbeville Horace roused himself, raising his head from the comfortable sofa on which he had been taking a refreshing nap, and exclaiming:

"Muriel, we must not forget the cripple piper!"

I looked round in surprise. Had he gone mad, or had we secreted with us some musical deformity whose presence was unbeknown to me?

"What do you mean?" I asked.

He laughed as he said:

"I mean the little man who for years has subsisted on the alms thrown him from the railway windows. I have flung him coins ever since I first went abroad, and you shall do it for me this time."

True enough, as we steamed into the Abbeville station, there, outside the rails, stood a little crooked man like a punchinello, piping away on a sort of shrill French bagpipes; and the showers of coppers flung out from the train, which were handed to him by the porters, proved what a well-known beggar he was.

Mrs. Davenel was highly indignant at this open encouragement of pauperism, and said the Charity Organisation must be much wanted in these parts. Spontaneous benevolence was never her *forte*, and she would not realize that the sick and deformed cannot earn their livelihood legitimately.

We had a day's rest in Paris, where, sedulously guarded by both Ropes and Auguste the courier, I saw some of its art treasures, and obtained a small glimpse of this brightest capital in the world.

It was at Dijon that I first had my desire of wandering about alone. I went into one church after another, and felt how soothing and reverential is the soft half-light of those foreign buildings, and how it enhances the beauty of their quaint carvings, pillars, and stained-glass windows.

I watched with interest the peasants come in, and after laying down their bundles or baskets, kneel in quiet silence and earnest reverence before some favoured shrine.

I felt it could not be, as it is affirmed, only a matter of form with these poor people. I was sure that with many of them this leaving their busy lives for a few moments, this effort to turn their thoughts to God, could not fail to have some good influence over their daily conduct; and then and

there I longed that throughout the length and breadth of England, churches should never be closed, but should always stand open, inviting the weary, the troubled, the sin-laden, to come in, and there in deep communion, or even in restful stillness, to realize there is for them in God's house a home, whenever they wish it, where they can think out their cares, and sorrows, and perplexities, and find help if they choose to ask for it.

How I wished I were a man, and could raise my voice in Parliament to bring this about. How simple a thing to do, and yet what a blessing it might prove!

It is often said: "People can go to their own rooms and pray there just as well as in church." I will grant that, but how is it for those vast numbers who have no solitary places of their own; and, even if they had, is it not something to feel that we are in a house which for years—perhaps for centuries—has been consecrated to God? I cannot help thinking that our thoughts would be sooner raised upwards in such a place than in our more mundane homes. I have no wish to leave my own Church, or to embrace Roman Catholicism, but during my stay abroad I found those open churches an unspeakable comfort.

At times when I was very weary, when old memories tortured, when hope seemed dead within me and faith feeble, I would steal into some sacred building, and there, unmarked, unnoticed, I would remain for a few minutes, and when I went out again into the warm bright sunshine, I would feel strengthened and helped for the day. In one's own room one prays, and God blesses the prayer, but one cannot have the same feeling as one has in a church, where one realizes the full communion of prayer, where help and comfort are specially promised to one.

That evening, as we sat in the quaint old sitting-room of the Dijon hotel, I spoke out some of these thoughts to Horace. I had for some time made the resolution that, save in one thing where I was forced to be reserved, I would in all others tell him everything.

He told me that the hearing all I did, and felt, whenever I returned to him after any absence, made up to him in great measure for his enforced idleness and do-nothingism, so I had become quite a storyteller in a small way, and used to tuck facts into my brain, purposely that I might retail them. It was curious how my powers of observation developed when I had this motive for exercising them.

When I had described to him all I had seen in this interesting old town, which was quite unknown to him, for, excepting of course Paris, he had hitherto only raced through France *en route* for other countries, I exclaimed : "How I wish churches were always open at home. I know some few are, here and there, but I would like it to be a universal custom."

Mrs. Davenel, who had been out of the room for a little while, now came in and ensconced herself in a crimson velvet chair, built after the French fashion, very high, stiff-sprunged, and well curved in the cushion, so that you sat with extreme difficulty in the exact centre, or else you felt like slipping off. These un-easy chairs suited Mrs. Davenel; she liked the perpendicularity they demanded from the unfortunate sitter; they allowed of no pleasant leanings back, or soft indulgence of bodily weariness, so they were the one thing she praised with effusion while we were abroad. She had heard my last remark, and before Horace could answer put in her word.

"I do not at all agree with you, Muriel. It would be a temptation to thieves if churches were left open, and we are not so emotional as these foreigners, so don't need these outward helps; besides, have we not our own rooms to go to?"

"I am not sure," said Horace, "that I don't go a long way with Muriel in her wish. I am not much of a churchy man as you know, but I think I even might be sometimes tempted in, if I felt I could have church to myself and stay as short or as long a time as I pleased. The feeling in our long services that we must stay to the end or else cause a sensation by going out, has often deterred me and many others too from going to church. I don't say it is right to stay away for that reason, but it is a fact that we do so; and to many of us ten minutes going by our own free-will to church, just by oneself, might do more good than those prosy long services, to which one goes hating them, and only because it is the proper thing to do. Your argument about thieves, mother, is all bosh. What use would a cushion or hassock, or one or two mouldy prayer-books be to a man whose taste lies in jewels and real silver? Besides, if punishment for robbing churches were made much heavier than for other thefts, it would soon prevent that sort of purloining."

Mrs. Davenel made no answer, so I took up my share in the discussion.

"I think I wish it most for poor people. I am sure they would not dislike church as they do if they felt it was as much for them as for the rich. Now

they cannot feel it so, for it is mostly used only on Sundays, and demands clean clothes, and much preparation on their parts. But let the door always stand invitingly open, let the poor tired workers feel that for a few minutes they can, if they wish, be still, can go even in their work-day clothes, away from the turmoil of cramped-in courts and alleys, into those sacred precincts where no one will laugh or jeer at them, where they can kneel, and if their bitter tears fall, no one will mock at them for giving way to their feelings. The terrible thing for the poor is that they live in public, they have no place where they can go to and be by themselves. I truly believe many a man and woman might often be checked in crime, if a few minutes of solitude in some sacred place could be given to them—if they only had time to think. I hear of coffee-taverns and reading-rooms for men, and they are very good things, and I trust they will increase; but they do no good, or very little, to women, and even they are only another though a better way of living in public than gin-palaces. Now if all our churches were open, many a half-worried tormented creature might be tempted to go in just to be quiet and rest, and by-and-by might be induced to join in the holy services which they see make those who share in them so much the

happier. You see," I concluded, turning to Mrs. Davenel, "even our own private rooms cannot be quite the same as God's own house, where even the worst of us feel we ought to be thinking of Him, so that we, too, as well as the poor, would be the better for having churches open to us."

Mrs. Davenel grumbled, saying that "when Horace and I combined against her there was no use in her giving her opinion;" but she did not say this ill-naturedly, and Horace laughed as he remarked "he did not know I had so much of the preacher in me, and some things I said were true; but that when I had travelled more, I would see that there was often irreverence in the manners and behaviour of many of the lookers-on, even in churches which were always open, and that it would be very difficult to work it properly."

"Yes," I said, "I know that well; but that is no reason for not trying the experiment. Certainly the present coldness of our people to church services does not arise from too much, but rather from too little acquaintance with them. And the plan does answer too sometimes, for at Durnford our beautiful church is always open—people go in and out as they like, and have grown to feel a pride in it, and love it. I have heard of other places where it has been

equally successful. I assure you, when I came to The Chase and found your church only open during service, I quite missed the not being able to go in at other times."

Horace looked significantly at his mother, who coloured slightly, and seemed annoyed. He told me afterwards that Mr. Herbert had wished to have the church open always, but some of his parishioners, Mrs. Davenel at the head of them, had so opposed it, that to avoid discussion—it not being a vital point—he had given in.

I saw that, after my heedless fashion, I had said something which had vexed Mrs. Davenel; so I hastened to apologise, saying: "I am afraid I have been giving my opinions too freely. It is my great fault."

"It is," said Mrs. Davenel severely; "you mean well, but you are very young, and really don't understand properly what you have been talking about."

I had been very full of my subject and enthusiastic about it, and this remark rather chilled me; but it was very possible I had laid down the law too strongly, so I accepted my rebuke meekly.

When we were alone, Horace said I was a great deal too patient and gentle with his mother.

"I think not," I answered; "I have no business

to contradict one so much older than myself, and I am very anxious not to forget my respect to her. Besides, you must remember, that I was quite obstinate; for though I gave in and would not continue the subject, I never yielded the point."

He laughed and said: "That's just what my mother likes in you; she says most people are afraid of her, and give in to please her. But that you steadily hold your own. I believe that is the only way to treat bullies."

"Horace!" I said reproachfully.

"Yes," he repeated, "my mother is a bully of the first water. You and I are the only people who can cope with her. I by counter-bullying, and you——"

"Oh, please stop!" I interrupted. "I never want to manage your mother, or anyone; it is hard enough to manage myself."

"Yes, but you do manage all the same. People who try to manage themselves are the only ones who successfully manage others, because they do it by indirect influence and example, and don't preach and lecture." He stopped, and then presently remarked, as soon as he had completed a portentous yawn: "Muriel, we have moralised enough for one while. There is no piano in this sumptuous

apartment," as he looked round contemptuously at the faded velvet and ormolu, "so I can't have my evening meal of sweet sounds; but get the chess-board, and I will try to manage one game before going to bed. How tired I am! It is disgusting that only a few hours' railway work should tire a man who used to hunt most days, and dance most nights in the week. It's only a quarter of a man you are going to marry after all."

The change in the weather which was impending as we left England had arrived at last, for we travelled the next day to Lyons in thick falling snow. This made us very anxious for Horace, who suffered much from the increased cold. We had a somewhat picturesque greeting from the city of silks and velvets. We emerged from the dull darkness of its station into a world of light and gaiety. We drove through wide and handsome streets crowded with holiday-makers; the shops and houses were hung with brilliant illuminations, among which Chinese lanterns of every shape and hue gave an oriental air to the scene. The snow was lying thick on the ground, and the effect was most brilliant as the light shone on its pure and dazzling white.

It was charmingly attractive, and roused even our poor invalid from his half lethargy, as he looked

from the carriage window. We did not feel as if we were in a European town, it seemed as if it must be Pekin or Yokohama we were passing through; nor was the illusion dispelled as we entered the large vestibule of the hotel, and saw some Japanese in their gorgeous robes, intently gazing at us.

"What is happening?" we asked of the hotel master, and the answer was very simple: "Only some religious fête day." And yet each year it had the same power to arouse this simple gaiety in the hearts and minds of this pleasure-loving people. Truly we English enjoy our pleasures after a sad fashion; nowhere among us do you see the same light-heartedness as you do abroad. The Easterns who inspected our arrival were Japanese ambassadors, curious to see what English ladies were like, but as we were fur up to our eyelids, I don't think they saw much of us. But it was all very amusing to me, and I lay down that night on a couch with a curiously high headpiece, from whence hung curtains of sumptuous Lyons velvet, with quite an Arabian Nights sort of feeling.

The next day we were snowed up for some hours soon after we left Lyons. It was very trying. Mrs. Davenel was horribly frightened lest something should run into us; she would not understand that the very snow

petulant bursts of wrath; but I was sure it would never impress me with its dignity and grandeur, never be to me what the other was. Still it was wondrously lovely, and I took back with me to our hotel a stock of beauty to feast on, which was only very strongly renewed as, after leaving Marseilles, the train took us along the beautiful coast till we arrived at Savona.

How strange it seemed at the station there, to see the familiar face of Owens, The Chase coachman, with a broad grin of welcome on his wide mouth, as he awaited us with the carriage and horses, ready to take us to our temporary home. Mrs. Davenel was very happy when she saw this bit of The Chase, and leant back on the well-known cushions ejaculating, "This is like home; this is real comfort at last," as we drove down the long dusty road bordered with palms and aloes, till at last we stopped before the huge gates of the Villa Torino. But I felt that the spicy smell from the various aromatic shrubs on the hill-sides, and the warm balmy air was not very like what England was, at any rate, at that time of the year.

CHAPTER III.

THE SUNNY SOUTH.

THE Villa Torino was near the sea, with a background of mountains, the more distant ones looking delightfully cool and refreshing with their dainty summits of pure snow. We had nothing to intercept our view of the Mediterranean as it lay sparkling and gleaming before us, and we were only five minutes' walk from it. The grove of orange and citron trees in which the house stood was planted close to the water's edge, and was intersected by broad green walks which gave the most delightful promenades within our very gates. The Villa stood on a small eminence, was open to the cool refreshing breezes, and yet was sheltered from the more cutting winds. Terraces bordered with palms, aloes, daphnes, pepper, and numerous other fragrant-smelling shrubs which perfumed the air with their sweetness, led us down

into the cool shade of the grove. The principal sitting-rooms opened on to a wide verandah, where we mostly lived, and where we used to camp out for the greater part of the day.

It was all very perfect, but my greatest pleasure was a large olive plantation, which lay on the left side of the house, and to which we had the right of entry. At first the blue-green of the olive leaves was a disappointment to me; I missed the fresher hues of our trees; but by-and-by I saw how this duller tint harmonised with the brilliant light far more restfully than could our vivid greens; and the olive tree became very dear to me. I would often after sundown get many a precious quarter of an hour, when I would walk in the plantation, in the short twilight, enjoying the effects of light and shade, and admiring the weird trunks and gnarled branches of these most picturesque trees. Had I been a nervous woman, I could there have indulged in the most ghostly imaginings; and even I would sometimes start as I fancied some curious unearthly form before me, which would turn out to be only some more than ordinary fantastic effect, caused by the strange shapes of my pet olives.

We led an extremely *dolce far niente* existence in our beautiful home, an existence which would

have been intolerable to a man in full health and vigour, and with all the love of sports and active exercise strong in him, but which just suited the languid invalid who was struggling back by slow stages to his former health. At The Chase there was so much to remind him of the pleasures his delicacy made him lose; I have known the distant yelp of the hounds, on a fine hunting morn, to give him a fit of depression for the whole day; but here he was not reminded of the enjoyments he loved so well, and everybody being lazy around him, it did not seem invalidism, but rather the natural course of things, that he too should be inactive.

I should have languished under the oppression of this perfectly idle life but for my precious morning rambles. I took my coffee and roll quite early, and then, soon after dawn, I mounted a beautiful Spanish donkey, whose well-groomed black coat made him a very pearl among his fellow asses. Most of these animals rejoiced in names—grand historic or battle-sounding names—which are so dear to the hearts of the Italian people; and so my steed was dubbed Solferino.

A dear old Savonese accompanied me on foot; a quaint little woman dressed in black, with a scarlet kerchief on her head, a flower always tucked under

the left ear, which was arranged with the same coquetry with which she would have placed it there in her girlish days.

The contrast between the little withered apple of a face, seamed with a fine network of wrinkles, and the vivid hues of this natural decoration, at first struck me as very great; but I soon became used to it, as it is so commonly seen in the Riviera.

The women there fade much earlier than ours; they wear their fifty years as we do our seventy; but still they keep their freshness of enjoyment and their cheerfulness far longer. Their natures seem so much more childlike; for where would you meet an elderly peasant woman among us who would care so to ornament herself? I suppose climate has to do with it, and that if England were flooded with continual sunshine, more of it would get into our hearts, and influence our lives.

Old Babette, Solferino, and I would wander far on those exquisite mornings, now exploring one beautiful ridge, now another; now wandering by the seashore, now resting in some sheltered nook to gather the lovely wild-flowers and ferns, for which each year, alas! one has to search farther afield, because strangers pluck not merely the delicate blossoms and

fronds, but tear them up by the roots in their greedy haste.

Sometimes we would be intensely idle, and would lie beneath the shade of some graceful olive, looking far far away to the silvery sheen of the sea, which was framed like a picture in some exquisite arch of verdure ; or we would revel in the intense wondrous blue of the Mediterranean as we wound slowly round some high cliff or crag, gazing down the while into its clear depths.

I enjoyed all this as much as I could then enjoy anything, and I think old Babette was very happy too. When she was tired I made her mount the donkey, while I played the part of guide. This condescension, as she deemed it, was very strange to her. "I never feel tired now, signorina," she would say, laughing and showing her white teeth ; "my old bones have never ached since the happy day when the saints made you engage me for your cicerone."

We used to have long talks together, and I learnt more about the ways and lives of the dwellers in these parts than one often hears. I think Babette was a really devout old woman ; when we passed some roadside chapel it came to be a matter of course that she should go in and pay her morning orisons.

It generally ended in my tying Solferino up in some secure place and following after her. I had no tithe of beads to accomplish, nor did I wish to do so, but it did me no harm, I think, to kneel beside the poor peasant woman and join my prayers to hers.

The difficulty was to tear myself away from my beautiful outdoor life and to return to the Villa in time. But I was rarely late, and indeed, till ten o'clock was a liberal margin of leisure to give to me. I used to feel, as I went slowly up the marble stairs to the verandah, as if my day's pleasure were over, my day's work begun—a work apparently of the completest leisure and idleness, but really difficult to me.

Horace was by this time usually either in the *salon* or out on the verandah awaiting me, and when I had displayed to him the various treasures I had collected in my rambles, I would rush away to divest myself of my habit, and to be in readiness for our late breakfast or early lunch—we had fallen into foreign hours as regarded our meals, such being his wish.

Mrs. Davenel was generally in appearance when I returned, and we used to linger long over the morning meal. Sometimes it would be very cheerful, but sometimes the mother and son would spar at one another, and then it was most unpleasant.

Poor woman! she could not alter her nature because she dwelt in France instead of England. Perhaps the sunshine had not had time to shine enough into her; certainly she would not learn to adapt herself to foreign ways. I need scarcely say that a very good staff of servants had been engaged for our establishment, and they did for us comfortably, though not perhaps as tidily as if we were in England. Mrs. Davenel would try to accomplish the impossible, viz. turn them into well-drilled English servants. We had some misery in consequence, for the pleasure-loving Savonese, who respond so readily to kindness, only stiffen into dull obstinacy under severity. What most exasperated my future mother-in-law was their hopeless mendacity. I do not believe these dwellers in the province of Nice look on a lie as we are taught to do—the truth is literally not in them; and I always hope and believe they have never realised the sin there is in the contrary. But Mrs. Davenel realized it for them to a painful extent. She would chafe herself into a fever over their quite unnecessary fibs and the *insouciance* which would never allow them to be hurried. I think I can see her now, standing, cut out in bold relief, between me and the sea, as she awaited our presence for breakfast.

She always wore the inevitable short black gown, which, as at The Chase, she kept on till she thought she had done the work which there was no need for her to do; and with flushed and irritated mien would usually greet me with, "Here you are, Muriel, looking as fresh as possible. Ah, it is easy to see you have no worries. I do think those servants are worse than ever," and then would begin a rigmarole of complaints which it was hard work to hear and pacify.

She took a very special dislike to the housemaid, who chiefly waited on me—old Anita, though I believe she was not much over forty. Certainly her notion of dusting was elementary. I once heard of a sermon being written on the necessity of sweeping under the mats, which took the subject both literally and figuratively. Poor Anita would never enter the kingdom of heaven if the clearance of dust in her vocation were the *sine quâ non* for that spiritual advancement, but in all else than that I grew to be very fond of her. I would sometimes lock my doors and dust my rooms carefully myself, so as to avert from her devoted head the lecture which would otherwise have descended on it. She was such a good old woman, and had had so much trouble in her life, about which she would tell me with such pathos in her homely face, and such faith that God knew best,

which was a sermon in itself. She was very truthful; how that came about I don't know, for it was so different from her compatriots, but it was a proof of the deep-downism of her religion. She had a great wish to go to England; poor foolish old body, as I used to tell her, to wish to leave sunshine for fogs, to desire to live in a country where, for poor people, life is one struggle against disadvantageous surroundings. However, to humour her, I taught her English at odd moments. I soon won her love, and she esteemed me as something wonderfully good and perfect. I remember one day I was stretched on the sofa in my pretty little sitting-room, enjoying a fascinating novel, when a long sigh drew my attention, and there, with a very unused duster in her hands, and an adoring expression on her homely kindly features, stood Anita.

"Ah, mademoiselle!" she cried, dropping the duster and raising her hands to heaven, "how good you are; how you pray and read good books—always, always!"

I felt abashed, and was beginning to explain that it was not a good book, though I hoped not a wicked one, which I was reading; but I felt it was so hopeless to make her—who, in her unread simplicity, supposed all literature to be missals and books of

devotion—understand, that rather guiltily I left her faith in my extreme goodness undisturbed. Poor Anita, I should like to see you again. But to return to our breakfast. It was my mission, my most special work, to seek peace and ensure it between Mrs. Davenel and her son, to divert their minds from uncomfortable topics. Savonese fashion, I almost invented incidents—certainly made the most of such as did happen in my small excursions, so as to promote conversation, and more often than not I succeeded.

It did me great good to see that both mother and son hailed my advent as a welcome change. I was grasping my nettle firmly, and so it was ceasing to sting. I was fixing my whole mind into my life, so it was gradually becoming of more interest to me, and very different from that cold outside life which it had been previous to the conflict, which had taught me in how much I needed to change.

After breakfast Mrs. Davenel would bustle away, always under the same delusion that her fidgeting was beneficial to the household. I would then read the papers to Horace, and in that and divers other occupations the time would slip away, till the hour came for the afternoon drive. Then came dinner, and

the evenings, which were given to music and other things.

As Captain Davenel gained in strength we would sometimes saunter through the town and along the promenade. We lived in the air, for he could not have too much of it; indeed, the warm sun was lending quite a brown tinge to his cheeks, which I used to tell him was rather becoming than otherwise. Such small society as Savona possessed was at our disposal; but I, for one, cared very little to go out. Mrs. Davenel went to some of the weekly receptions held at the English clergyman's, and sometimes I accompanied her, but they were not very lively or I was not in tune for them. There was a great lack of the masculine element in Savona society, and parties in which the women are five times more numerous than the men are apt to be somewhat dull and unenergetic. Any man sentenced to the Riviera will not—unless really ill, as poor Horace was—submit to the gentle dulness of Savona. He would choose Nice or Monaco, and there find the distractions which mostly please the nobler sex. So, in the dear little town in which we were now sojourning, elderly clergymen, fathers of grown-up families, or young consumptive boys, mostly represented the male sex.

I was often invited to join the excursions to some favoured spot, but nearly always declined doing so. I so much preferred my solitary morning expeditions. This was not like what I used to be—what in time I might come to be again. It used to be a joke at Durnford that Muriel Sterling could not bear to be “out” of any little festivity, however small and unexciting it might be; but that Muriel no longer existed, and the present one shrank from strangers and indifferent talk, and tried entirely to absorb herself in her life’s work, to the exclusion of all other interests.

I was very thankful to find, as the weeks went by, that I was more and more entering into Horace’s life, growing more and more to care for him, not, alas, in the way he would wish, but calmly, unemotionally, sensibly; and I found that this phantom of love, or rather this real body of friendship, stood me in good stead.

I enjoyed the talks with him in those quiet *tête-à-tête* we sometimes had, for I found under the supercilious crust he would lay over his really warm heart treasures of taste and feeling he scarcely knew he possessed, but which he fully displayed to me when no third person was by. He placed the most “absolute trust” in me—a trust which though

it almost pained me by its intensity, still only strengthened me in my resolution to be worthy of it, to be to him as far as I could all that he thought me to be. I have always wondered Mrs. Davenel was not more jealous of me, and I think she would have been if it had been my wish to marry her son ; but as it was, knowing as she did the undercurrent of sadness in my life, she less grudged his love for me than if I had been perfectly happy with him. Then, too, she must have noticed how I tried to bring about more peace between them, and seeing this softened her very much towards me. All things considered, though a strangely dissimilar trio, it was wonderful how well we got on.

Our life was a somewhat homely, primitive one now we were out of stiff ceremonious English society. Mrs. Davenel and I used to walk to our occasional evening dissipations, which began at eight and terminated soon after ten. We would get up from the dinner-table, and, putting on our cloaks and drawing the hoods over our heads, would saunter in the sweet moon or starlight by the sea-shore till we arrived at the house to which we were bidden. To Mrs. Davenel all this was very new and unaccustomed. Carriages and horses, men-servants and elaborate toilettes, and other such im-

pedimenta of luxury, had hitherto been inevitable accompaniments to all festivities in her life; but here all this would have been thought ridiculous; people made no difference in their ways, society was just an amplification of their daily habits, and much more enjoyable in consequence.

The first time we went out Mrs. Davenel gave solemn directions Owens was to be ready with the carriage that evening at eight. Horace soon put a stop to the arrangement. "That would be too absurd, Madam Davenel. The Parsonage is three minutes from here, and everyone will laugh at you if you fatigue yourself by driving there."

Mrs. Davenel thought it odd, and yielded the point with reluctance, though she confessed, as we walked home that evening, that it was much pleasanter, this coming and going without fuss and ceremony.

"Another stiffness melted down!" I thought exultingly to myself.

I was somewhat of a Bohemian, after an innocent fashion, and delighted in anything which made Mrs. Davenel less prejudiced. Though she would never own to it, she grew rather to like these small and tranquil assemblies. She went, as she said, because she did not wish to throw cold water on

the civility proffered to her ; but she really enjoyed them and the attention she received ; and even when Horace declined to spare me she would, with a pretence of grumbling at the necessity but with very real content, don her mantle and, accompanied by Ropes, show herself for an hour or so.

“There is no foolish dancing or flirting,” she remarked ; “nothing but rational conversation and music ; also no nasty foreigners.”

The lack of dancing and flirting arose from the paucity of gentlemen, and from no special elevation of taste, and no doubt the miss of them was a sore grief to the many young ladies congregated in the small reception-rooms thrown open to the English residents. The rational conversation was not devoid of a strong gossipy flavour, but it was conducted with perhaps more intelligence than in our English country homes, everybody having travelled or going to do so. The music was sometimes good, but generally only *comme ça* (as Anita used, Italian fashion, to accentuate those expressive French words). I was very sorry that no French people resorted to these parties, and wished they and the English could be brought more *en rapport* with each other ; I think both would benefit by the contact.

I had many a quiet bit of amusement at these

evenings in which Mrs. Davenel did not share—for she never saw fun in anything—as I noticed how elderly gentlemen, feeling they had it all their own way, dispensed with condescension their attentions among the numerous damsels, young, middle-aged, and old, to anyone of whom half-an-hour's undivided talk with a man was almost an embarrassment, because of the remarks it excited.

About ten o'clock would come a solemn pause and a hush, and then the meagre staff of men present would each gravely select a lady and lead her into the adjoining room, where hot and cold negus, cakes and sweet biscuits, were the simple refreshment offered to us. The senior dames were led out first, but each gentleman was expected to do quadruple duty, and by degrees we were all in our turn escorted to the feast. Sometimes two ladies, either more vigorous in will or more anxious for the refreshment, would arm-in-arm venture by themselves, but this was deemed slightly presuming, so we usually waited till we were fetched.

The conversation always became more sprightly as we stood round the simple buffet arranged for our benefit. The negus, not being of a potent description, could not exhilarate, but we had a feeling that greater animation at this crisis ought to be. It always

reminded me of the going into a tea-room between the dances—only, alas, there was no dancing. Mrs. Davenel was generally the chief lady present, and was stationed in a huge easy-chair, from whence she surveyed, as a queen does, her subjects. She could not understand why I saw anything comical in it, and when Horace used to laugh at my descriptions, thought us both very silly. Certainly she was quite right when she would declare that these small gatherings did conduce towards sociability, and brought people together harmoniously, and it was very good of Mr. Sevil, our chaplain, and his round-faced smiling sister to give themselves so much trouble on our behalf, and I think the harmless fun I made out of it all was far more to amuse our invalid than from any wish to ridicule.

The great feature of the day was the arrival of the English post. I read all my letters, except mother's, out to Horace. The reign of misrule Mrs. Davenel so dreaded did not seem to have arrived at The Chase. I think the servants and dependents were resolved to show they could work better unscolded. Kitty's letters, of course, were full of her father. She said he seldom now came to the schoolroom, but as his time was getting so short, preferred having his child to himself, so he

took her long walks and rides, or made her sit with him in the library.

"I suspect the schoolroom is not so entertaining now you are gone from it, Muriel," said Horace with a return to his satirical manner, when I read this out to him. "Stewart always said you were the best company possible—a good listener, and yet having plenty of your own ideas wherewith to keep up talk. Does he send any message to you?"

"No," I remarked quietly; "I have read you every word of the letter;" and then, with a feeling of relief, I would put it aside. It was always an effort, the reading out these epistles, but I never omitted it.

My mother had long ago returned to Durnford. She met Mr. Stewart during her last week at The Chase, but said nothing more about him than that she quite understood his being a general favourite, for he was so kind. And then, except that her letters were, if possible, even more loving than heretofore, she made no further reference to people and things which had best not be discussed between us.

CHAPTER IV.

THE ARBUTIS RIDGE.

TIME passed quickly, as is often the case when we are spending it uneventfully, monotonously. The middle of April had come on us almost unawares, save that it recorded its presence by the burning heat which is generally felt in Southern France about this period. Horace was much better, stronger almost than when I first saw him, now eleven months ago; but he was beginning to feel languid from the oppressive warmth, so we were now talking of where we should next go. It would not do to lose the ground which had been so hardly won.

We had not much choice. We dared not pass the Alps to visit colder latitudes, so North Italy and the Italian Lakes seemed our only and yet very beautiful resource. Horace was unacquainted with the latter, so it was arranged that, after one

or two flying visits to the wonderful Italian cities for my benefit, we should betake ourselves to Como or Maggiore, and there occupy some beautiful villa for the summer months.

I was so sorry to leave Savona—for every reason sorry. I had had so much peace there, and I knew that the haunting dread of my life, viz. my marriage, was not to be till after we left it.

I thought with dread of that villa by some beautiful lake, for I feared, if my betrothed went on improving, that Mrs. Davenel would probably return to England from thence, leaving her son under his wife's care. Still, nothing was said about all this, so I kept hoping against hope that Mrs. Davenel would yet spend the summer with us, and the evil day be deferred.

Neither Mrs. Davenel nor I were feeling well ; the heat enervated constitutions which throve best on strong bracing air. I think, too, our tempers suffered under the dry parching effect of the hot air. My future mother-in-law became irascible to an extraordinary degree, and her unreasonable moods chafed me in a way they had never done before. I was also missing very much those quiet refreshing morning rambles which used to put me in tune for the whole day. I had them still, but no longer had them alone ;

for since Horace had regained his good health he too craved for the morning breezes, and wished to have more of my company, which the joining my excursions gave him. So, much to my regret, dear old Babette was dispensed with, and he was instead my companion. The hours I took to myself in the burning heat of the day, while he had his siesta, in no way made up to me for those alone, but not lonely, communings in the pure morning air, when the harmony without would rebuke the discord within, when God would speak to me in His beautiful works, strengthening and resting me in His unspeakable way.

We were within a week of leaving Savona. Indeed, for Horace's sake, it was full time we should change our quarters, yet he shrank so from the idea of moving. Sometimes I fear, there was greater weakness in him than he would let appear, or than his tanned healthy-looking face seemed to justify, which made him so dread the fatigues of travelling, which in our luxurious case were indeed reduced to a minimum. Auguste, the courier, had gone to Lake Maggiore to choose some exquisite pearl of a villa residence, and was to be back in time to escort us on our travels. Mrs. Davenel was working herself into a frenzy about our approaching departure. I had offered my help, though in truth there was nothing

needing to be done, at least by us, and had had my services rejected with an acerbity which had hurt me much, till at last I had the good sense to set it down to the irritating effects of the heat. Poor Anita and Babette were in despair at the thoughts of my leaving them, and only pacified by my promise to revisit Savona if I could.

One evening Horace exclaimed :

“ We will to-morrow explore that Arbutis Ridge, Muriel, of which you are always vaunting the beauty. You will like to say good-bye to it, so that shall be our morning’s trip.”

I assented, and we both thoroughly enjoyed our ride, as once on the top of it we followed its lovely windings, and admired the varied views which every turn of the mountain-path gave us. At last, wearied out, we dismounted, and resting beneath the shade of a tree, first talked and then sank into silence. We had been a long time without speaking, I, as I could too easily do, forgetting his presence as I looked far away to the white sails in the distance, and thought of things in which he could take no interest.

My companion at last said impatiently :

“ Muriel, are you never coming back to me ? ”

“ What do you mean ? ” I answered smiling, as

I turned to him. "Am I not near you, with you? how can I come back to you?"

"Yes," he rejoined, "in one sense you are near me—at least your bodily presence is with me, but for this half-hour past in which I have been watching you, you, your real self, have not been here at all. It has been as if a whole world were between you and me, and as if I could not see you through it. True, at one word from me you are with me again, for you always do as I wish, but I know that the Muriel who looks so wistfully into the far distance is a stranger to me, and yet it is that Muriel whom I most wish to have, who I feel sure, is the most worth having."

I sighed. I always disliked these investigations of his, and was annoyed if ever by want of caution I gave rise to them.

"I am horribly absent I know," I replied; "it has always been my stupid way to be so. I must try to mend of it; only remember, however unreserved I always wish to be with you, still I have, as everyone has I think, thoughts and feelings I cannot share even with those nearest to me."

"I know all that," he said gloomily, "but I

know also, that between those who love each other intensely, reserves melt away as fogs do beneath a warm sun. Muriel, will you never love me as I love you? You are devoted to me, you are the very brightness of my life, and yet there are times when I feel as if you were not, and never would be, nearer than we are now; when I feel as if between us a great gulf were fixed—a gulf you yourself have placed between us. Do you try your best to bridge it over? I never ask what may have come into your life before we met, or since we met, but I know this—there is no one can or will ever care for you as I do. You must believe this, and does not this knowledge warm your loving heart to me? Surely it must do so, for you are full of feeling, you are so unselfish.”

I looked into his face, and, seeing there the strength of his passion for me, wondered if he were right. Might it not be that no one loved me as he loved me? Oh, the pity of it! that I could not return it in kind, that I had given my best affections to one who, perhaps from his very genial nature, took such interest in his child, in his fellow-creatures, even in his life's work, that, though I was very dear to him, still it might be that I was not the absorbing interest to him which I was to the man I was going to

marry, who seemed to care for me only in the wide world.

It might be also that I gave more love to Faulkner Stewart than he gave to me ; and yet, even if this were so, it would make no difference. I did not suffer because I gave him so much more than he could give me, but I did suffer very acutely just now because I gave Horace Davenel so little. I was nearer to loving him in that hour from sheer duty than I had ever been before. I had been very weak and depressed the last few days, so could not help the tears which welled into my eyes as I thought all this. I drew nearer to him as I made answer :

"Indeed, you do love me very dearly; I do not deserve that you should love me so much. It is a great sorrow to me that I cannot give you as much as you measure out to me, and yet I am trying to. I care for you more and more. I am so grateful to you, for you are always so good to me. Will you not try to be content with what I give you? I cannot help it that it is not more."

My tears now fell fast. I longed to confess all to him, not with any thought of his releasing me from my word, but simply that I might have the great relief of being open with him. It would cost me much to speak, but deception had cost me even

more. I thought he was strong enough now to hear the truth. I almost felt as if, with perfect confidence between us, I could have some faint hopes of building up the love which he so longed that I should feel for him. I began hesitatingly :

“Horace, I think, if you would let me be quite open with you——” But I went no farther, for something in his face checked my speech. He had watched me intently all this time, had scanned my extreme agitation with not unkind compassion, but mingled with it was a leaven of that hardness which characterised his mother’s nature, and which curiously blended with weakness, was in his also. Before I could resume the confession, which trembled on my lips, he interrupted me hastily, with almost peremptory decision.

“Muriel, tell me nothing. I have a perfect trust in you, and I wish to know nothing more than that you have promised to be my wife, and to try to love me all you can. I never wish to know more than I already know—or guess.”

The last word escaped him almost involuntarily. I could not turn my eyes from his.

Could it be possible that he guessed all then, and could it be that, though he suspected I loved another, he still wished to keep me for his own—could still

hope, not only to build up my love for him, but, far harder task, to unbuild my love for his rival? I would not so have done had I been in his place: I must have given him back his freedom if I knew he cared for another, even if I died in the so doing. But I suppose men are different from women—at least from women such as I am.

One relief came to me as I sat there thinking. There was now no obligation to bare my heart's secret to him. He himself had forbidden it; but this very forbiddance drove my tenderer feelings back into a more frigid channel—made me again sure that Faulkner Stewart's love, which bade me do the right, even though the doing it cost him so much, was nobler, more unselfish, grander than a passion which would rather see others suffer than deny itself.

Horace Davenel made a great mistake that morning on the Arbutis Ridge when he stopped my confession to him. Even if, on hearing that I loved another, he had offered to give me up, I should only the more have felt tied to him by every feeling of honour. So he would not have lost me—nay, might have gained me, for his generosity would have appealed to my deepest nature, would have made him far dearer to me than he had ever yet been. But he had made the mistake, and must abide by it.

I returned to the calm quiet friendship I had formed for him. The clear estimate I had always had of his spoilt and selfish though loving nature prevented keen disappointment, and I was almost thankful I felt justified to myself for not entertaining a stronger affection for him. This was the only time I had ever failed even for a moment in my heart's allegiance to Faulkner Stewart. I gladly returned to the love which, though it might give me the keenest pain of my life, was yet in one sense its greatest joy, for I loved one who was worthy of it.

Horace flushed beneath my gaze. I had ceased crying, and my agitation was quite over. He spoke again nervously, hurriedly:

"Perhaps it is, Muriel, that I cannot bear to hear what you may have to say; any way, I will not. So now the fault of secrecy is removed from your tender conscience. It is my doing, not yours, that its pure and good confidences are not unfolded to me. We will start our lives together, unknowing of each other's past. Mine is not so fair a page as yours; would to God it were! Muriel, why do you look so quietly at me? I liked those tears, that agitation, better than your present stillness. But I must not complain; it is I who have driven you back on yourself, and the reaction has set in." A deep pain

came into his voice as he resumed: "And yet it must be so. I dare not have it differently." Then after a pause, he went on again: "Now I want to talk of what I chiefly came here this morning to speak about—our future plans."

My heart throbbed passionately. Could he think the preceding conversation a fitting prelude for the discussion which was to come, and of which I guessed the purport? But I was resolved it should not be a long discussion, for my share in it should be only acquiescence. I said composedly, "What plans?" but I felt—I wonder if he did also—as if an ice-barrier had raised itself between us.

He spoke very tenderly as he told me he wished that our marriage should be not much longer delayed; that his father said he would come to be present at it, and to escort Mrs. Davenel home again. That if I approved, it might take place at Baveno, at the little English church there. He asked if I would like to have my mother with me, for that it could be easily managed if I wanted her.

I answered quickly: "No; I do not want her to come."

"Not wish to have her, Muriel!" he said in extreme surprise.

"No," I reiterated; "mother will not misunder-

stand. It cost us both a great deal when we last bade good-bye to each other, and this meeting will be for so short a time that it will be only a renewal of the pain: there will be no pleasure in it."

He seemed satisfied with my reply, and I was glad he was. I knew I should break down utterly in this crisis of my life, if I had one near me who sympathised too closely with me.

"I hope you won't mind its being a quiet wedding, Muriel; no bridesmaids, no fuss, no flummery."

"I prefer its being so," was my response. "Under no circumstances should I have cared for a gay wedding; it would be foreign to my nature, to my taste."

"I am glad to hear it. Do you know, Muriel, every proof that you are different from what I considered women to be, till I met you, rejoices my heart?"

"Will Kitty come with her grandfather?" I asked, the eager longing in my heart showing itself in my voice; her childish love would not appeal too closely, would soothe and not disturb the composure which I felt must not be ruffled, so I longed very much to have her with me again.

"I had not thought of it," he said, "but of course,

if you wish it really, she shall come. But, Muriel, I had hoped we should be by ourselves the first few weeks. After that she could come to us and be with us always. However, it shall all be as you like."

There was such deep disappointment in his tone that I was touched, and after a moment's thought yielded the point. His wish that we should be *tête-à-tête* was most natural, and that I did not share in it was a feeling which must be combated with. He was much pleased with me for giving this up so readily, and drew me to him with loving words and vows, telling me how he would strive to make me happy, would strive to win my love.

And now the increasing heat warned us we must return home, and I was glad to do so. We did not say much as we rode single file one before the other. The inequalities of the route luckily forbade connected conversation. I could also see, that though he was very glad all had been so speedily arranged, still he seemed very tired after the recent agitation. I tried to send my thoughts not to what we had been talking of, but to the more distant time when my one promised happiness would be accomplished, and my sweet Kitty be once more with me. Surely God

must have put into Faulkner's heart that plan of entrusting his treasure to me. It was the one bright spot in my future, the one comfort to which I looked forward.

The next week saw us leisurely travelling through North Italy *en route* for Baveno. I was now glad to have left Savona, I who till that conversation on the Arbutis Ridge had so loved it, had so dreaded the leaving it. But a nervous restlessness had now taken possession of me, and I was thankful to work it off by the combined pleasure and fatigue of travelling and sight-seeing. I forgot myself in the multitude of new and beautiful objects which happily had sufficient power to engross me, to the exclusion of sadder thoughts.

Whether Horace had caught cold on that morning on which we had our conversation, or whether the mere thought of the confidence he would not let me make worried him, certainly in that last week we spent in the Riviera he seemed to go back in strength, and he was both depressed and irritable. His affection for me became painful in its intensity. He could not bear me out of his sight, he could scarcely endure my speaking to anyone but him; his eyes would follow me with a sort of eager wistfulness which was distressing, and quite haunted me

at last. He was always talking of the future, as if, by every possible reference to the time when I would be his wife, he could make more and more sure of that for which he so longed.

I wondered if it were that he realized he had for ever missed the golden opportunity of winning my love. I had been all these months trying my best to raise him up to that ideal which alone could make up to me for what I had lost; but now that I saw that selfishness was still the root and groundwork of his love, my feelings had gone back to what they were, and would never change again. I feared, poor fellow, that he guessed all this, and suffered under it. Alas! he had neither the physical nor the moral strength for bearing trouble, for bearing the heroic pain of self-sacrifice. The true pity I felt for his weaker nature remained unaltered, so, though it was hard work, I did all I could to be patient under his difficult moods. Whenever he was like this with me he would neglect and be very cold to his mother, and she would be deeply hurt. Once, when she was alone with me, she said, with a jealousy she had rarely manifested towards me:

“Muriel, since you came into his life, I, his mother who bore him, who have worshipped him all these years, am as nothing to him. I shall be glad

to go back to England; this pain is more than I can bear."

"I am sorry for you," I replied; "I feel deeply for you, but am I to blame? Can I help it? Do I not do all I can? Is his jealous love happiness for me?" And then I put my arms round the poor mother's neck and kissed her tenderly, telling her it was only his being ill made him like this, and that I was sure he loved her through it all, and that now he was often sorry when he vexed her, which in former days he had not been.

It was not difficult for me to do this; we two women had grown much dearer to each other in our common anxiety, and I had lost all fear of poor Mrs. Davenel.

Something in my words and caress softened her; she burst into tears, saying: "God will bless you Muriel, for all you do for us. Out of your own trouble you strengthen me. I will never murmur against you, even in my heart, or if I do I will tell myself it is false of me, for you are always true."

We said no more then, or afterwards, but she began to cling very closely to me, and when Horace saw how she turned to me, his peevishness was shamed into good-humour; and soon after we left

Savona, change and the fresher air doing us all good, brought about again much of the old harmony in our small circle. I am sure good comes out of all trouble, save sin trouble unrepented of. Mrs. Davenel's disappointment in her son made her turn more lovingly to the remembrance of the husband whose affection she had hitherto despised. Once she broke out with :

"I am longing to see him again."

"Who?" I answered stupidly, trying to bring my thoughts together.

"Mr. Davenel of course," she said, much annoyed I did not at once apprehend her meaning, while a tender, almost girlish flush came over the delicate skin as she spoke.

"I can quite believe it," I said gently, and feeling so pleased; "I know he has missed you very much."

Despite my various troubles, I shall always look on the month which succeeded our departure from the Villa Torino as an enjoyable one. I did so fully appreciate the new world into which I was transported, and the change from a somewhat jarring and monotonous home circle to the publicity of hotel life was I think good for us all. I persuaded Horace to let us dine table d'hôte instead of entombing

ourselves in dreary state in our own rooms, and feeding on the réchaufféed and half-cold remains of the really good dinners served to the general public. Though he did not like me much to talk to strangers, still I had many a pleasant interesting conversation with the people we met, which let plenty of fresh air into my mind.

I will not say anything about the old towns through which we wandered, for my readers know the stately splendours of Genoa, the art wonders of Florence, the glory of Milan cathedral, the old-world beauty of Venice, and the special variety which invests each smaller Italian town with its own peculiar charm, far more perfectly than I could describe them.

To me there was novelty and pleasure in everything. It was all so different to any former experiences. I specially remember my sensations when I first saw the wondrous galleries of the Pitti and the Uffizi. It was not even so much enthusiasm and delight as a curiously at-home feeling—as if I had been suddenly transported into good company, who would entertain me restingly, thoroughly, harmoniously, and with whom I was on the best of terms.

I am no educated connoisseur in pictures—I wish

I were—though I do believe that education sometimes rubs off the bloom from intelligent ignorance, and while teaching us to criticise, robs us of much of our pleasure. Still I have no doubt that I passed over much that was really beautiful from my want of knowledge, but I fastened greedily on what I could love and understand, and returning again and again to my favourites found entire content therewith. I had one drawback—those in whose company I was, had little sympathy with my enthusiasm. Mrs. Davenel said she could never bear more than half-an-hour of pictures, and that half-hour used not to be borne too patiently. Captain Davenel was as completely uneducated as the average type of fashionable men. Hitherto, in his journeyings, he had only sought to renew his London life and pleasure in each foreign capital he had visited, so had given little or no time to art or sightseeing. Now that he was debarred by his ill-health from his former amusements, and that he wished from love of me to enter into my tastes and likings, he would strive to get up an interest in them, and would go about with me when he could. It was very good of him, but it was all uphill work, and I never felt the real pleasure of companionship with him. Nothing chills one more, when going

about sightseeing, than to feel that those with you are politely trying to hide that they are bored. Once I had a great treat. A clever artist, whose acquaintance we had made, ciceroned me through the galleries, and it was almost as if he made me a present of another pair of eyes, so much more was there to see when he pointed out things to me; but this was a pleasure I dared not repeat—Horace was so desperately hurt when he saw that this stranger's society in the picture world gave me more pleasure than his did, that I declined any further offer of escort which was made to me.

CHAPTER V.

VENICE.

Or all the places we visited I loved Venice the most. And yet I quite understood Horace when he said, that for a few days it was charming, but after that, the stillness would be oppressive, deathlike ; and, no doubt, to the masculine mind, the absence of all equestrian life is a great trial. If I wanted to punish a horsey man in the most vindictive way, I would sentence him to a year's residence in Venice. I fear he would end like the donkey, who, report says, after a twelvemonths' sojourn in the City of Silence, went mad for lack of his own kith and kin. To me, however, not being a man, there seemed no lack anywhere. I missed nothing, and wanted nothing more than the stones of Venice gave me. Mrs. Davenel's terrors at the gondola life which we now led were extreme. I have before said that she was a most

nervous traveller, and most especially when on the water. After vainly trying to reason away her fears we had to yield to them, and generally left her in the hotel or walking, accompanied by Ropes, whenever she found comfortable walking, while we made our excursions. Horace thoroughly enjoyed these said excursions, and at Venice I had no lack of sympathy in my enjoyment, as he and I would explore even the most distant islands, till at last we saw more of their quaint curiosities than did the generality of travellers.

While we were in Venice an old cardinal was good enough to die—an old, old man, who must have become weary of the world he was leaving, who was very rich in years, and we will also hope rich in goodness. It was very wrong of me to be so glad he died, but as he must die I could not help rejoicing that it was while I was in Venice, and that I, in consequence, came in for so much that was interesting. His nearest relative or most expectant heir could not have paid his obsequies more honour than I did. I even neglected my home duties those two days which were given up to his funeral. I haunted the great procession as it circulated through the piazza, then followed it into St. Mark's, and stayed there during a greater portion of the service. The music was

almost overpoweringly affecting in its weird melancholy, and touched me strangely. I told Ropes, who was my kind patient companion in my wanderings, to stay where she was, and going far from her I took refuge in a quiet remote corner, which was almost deserted by the people, and where, unperceived, I could enjoy the harmony in the solitude for which I so craved. I sank on my knees, and covering my face with my hands, let the power of the grand choral have its full sway over me, as it now pealed, now wailed through the vast building. It was a very solemn moment to me. I was not excited; nay, the feverish unrest of the last few weeks seemed stilled beneath the mighty spell of the music. But a deep sadness took possession of me. I thought not of the dead whose rest we were now solemnizing, but I thought of the infinite suffering of the living, and wondered why there should be so much, wondered how our loving God himself could bear to see it all. I knew that to those who endure their griefs patiently and rightly the rest time must come, yet I wearied unutterably for that time; it seemed so long to it, the way so hard and difficult, we poor mortals so unequal to the struggle. I do not know for how long or how short a time I had been there. I scarcely thought where I was

when I felt a light touch on my arm. I looked up, neither surprised nor startled; my feelings had gone too deep down for those sensations. Near me stood an old priest, with the kindest face I ever saw. It was a very interesting face too, for one could see there had been much sorrow, much conflict in the past, and yet there had now come to it the sunshine of abiding peace. He was looking at me with an intensity of expression in his intelligent dark eyes, which seemed to read me through and through. I saw he was going to speak, and waited quietly till he did.

"Daughter," he said in French, guessing that language might be the most familiar to me, "I have been watching you for some time, and have seen that you are strangely troubled. Can I help you in any way? It is my mission—the mission which has been given me—to comfort the weary and heavy-laden."

I rose from my knees, and, English fashion, put my hand in his; thus expressing, as far as I could, that I knew the sympathy proffered me was genuine.

"Sir, I am not of your communion; so I could not confess to you; but I feel your goodness, and I thank you very much."

"You must pardon me," he said gravely and courteously, "for my intrusion. I thought you were one of us, and, thinking so, it was right of me to speak to you. But even as it is, mademoiselle," he went on with the quick tact which made him fear annoying any Protestant prejudices by giving me any other title than my society one, "it is just possible that an old man, without prying into your confidence, without seeking to know your trouble, may say a few words to console and strengthen; may, out of his large experience and God helping him, make that trouble easier for you to bear."

I said he was very kind, and, not liking to repulse him, I let him lead me to a seat near, where we soon fell into earnest conversation. The fact that he was an absolute stranger, that he could know nothing of me or mine, his great age, and his singular homeliness—if I could so describe the infinite tenderness and gentleness of his manner—all induced me to be very unreserved with him. It was a great relief to speak of my mental difficulties, as I mentioned no names, and outlined facts so faintly that they were but the dimmest sketch of my real life. I felt absolutely certain that this courteous gentleman sitting beside me would

never seek to know more of me than I wished him to know, would never speak to any one of what I told him. I was sure no vulgar curiosity had brought him to my side, but that in him was the burning desire to lift from any, from every heart if he could, the pressure sin, or God's loving chastening hand, had laid upon it, or if he failed in that, at least to alleviate, to console, and to point to the real Consolation. When I had told him much of my inner life; when I hinted to him that that life would soon be where its path must be an uncongenial and painful one; when I told him that though I was resolved to go through with it, still that I shrank from the struggle it must be, and feared I should often fail, that I dreaded the long years before me, dreaded my own weakness, my own imperfections, he heard me patiently and with the gravest compassion.

"Daughter," he said, relapsing involuntarily into the usual form of address which with him was, I am sure, no formal appellation, but rather the expression of the tender sympathy he felt for his fellow-creatures—"daughter, fear nothing in your future life but your own imperfections; fear them, however, with all your might and main, and guard against them with the weapons God gives to you.

Put Him between you and them—see them, see your whole life, through His loving medium, and helped by His ordinances, and then, and then only can a sad life be made bearable, peaceful, happy. Do not fear or shrink from the trouble and pain which may be before you. Do you not know that trouble and pain, borne for His sake, are His means to knit your soul to His, perhaps even to win other souls to His glory? Daughter, be grateful to Him, if He has called on you to endure. This bearing a Cross for His sake is a great honour to which He has elected you. It may be that your loving heart is drawn from the channel into which it most wished to enter. It may be, it has to return back on itself, repressing its most tender feelings, and living in cruellest isolation; or perhaps, hardest of all, it may be constrained to give its richest treasures where it would fain not. I know not which of these trials are yours, but I do know that all and every trial in which we let God be with us, is trial from which the bitterness is taken away. You say the saddest part of your life is yet to come; but how do you know what is before you? Sometimes the dreaded cup of sorrow is withdrawn from our lips before we need drink of it; and even if we have to take of it, it does not hurt us so much if

only we quaff it in meek submission to His Holy Will. I, who speak to you now, have known much wrong-doing, much grief in my past life, but believe me when I tell you that the chalice of suffering never contains one drop more than is just needful for us—that in time its bitterness becomes so sweetened by God's love, that at last we grow to see that all its pain has been our greatest good."

He paused, and fearing lest he misunderstood, I said :

"You must not think that this which is coming to me is any grand or heroical self-sacrifice. I had to do it, and did not know how much it demanded of me till it was too late to draw back. To outward appearance my future lot seems enviable and prosperous. It is only just within myself—it is only known to God, and one or two of my fellow-creatures, how painful it is for me, how difficult it will be. You must not think me better than I deserve."

"Good child!" he said softly, a beautiful smile shining out of his dark eyes. "Always be honest and true; never be otherwise. But, indeed, I had guessed all this from what you hinted to me, and all I say fits equally well your case. It is the sacrifices the world does not know of—the sacrifices

which God only marks in our inward heart—which are the most acceptable to Him, which are doing His work in the world. The martyrs who died for Him were very glorious, but those who patiently endure their trials and disappointments, who are cheerful and bright outwardly though their hearts bleed inwardly, who do all this because they love God and their neighbour, are just as great as the blessed martyrs in His sight. Daughter, remember this, that in the great hereafter we shall look back with more thankfulness to the trials than to the prosperity in our lives, for we shall know what they have done for us.”

“But God does not expect us to be thankful for trouble here. How could one be so while it is hurting one so?” I asked.

“God never requires of us impossibilities, my daughter; and if we can be patient under trial, can realise that one day we may be thankful for it, He will be content. Even those who love you most tenderly, and know you the best will not judge you with such fair kind judgment as He does. Always look on Him as your best Friend. May I give you one caution? Don’t let your sorrow render you morbid and sensitive, so that you exaggerate it. Secret unacknowledged grief tends to make

us pity ourselves too much. Try, and take up a healthy view of life. It is true that, through no fault of yours—always thank God for that—but through some sad mischance, you may not have what you long for, and may have to live a life which is repugnant to you; but are you to go mourning all your days because of that? Are you to be restless, unsettled, despondent, and useless because our Holy Father has called you to tribulation instead of joy? No, assuredly not. You must, on the contrary, strive to be very cheerful; you must exert all your gifts, all your powers of mind and heart in His service, that those around you may learn to love Him, because they see how you love and how His love influences you, and gives you peace and joy. Take up a daily, hourly crusade against yourself, your gloom, your sins, your griefs. Daughter, I envy you that you are yet so young, that you have perhaps many many years to give to our dear Lord, who gives so much for you. My life is nearly over, and though I weary to be at rest, still I often wish for the time over again, that I might do more for Him.”

His words almost died away into a whisper as he clasped his hands as if in prayer and looked upwards, with an expression of intense love and

adoration. For a few minutes we were both silent ; then, timidly touching those withered hands to recall his attention, I said gently :

“ You scarcely know, scarcely can know, the good you are doing me. I was just wanting the help you give me. I shall never forget your words, and, whether it be joy or trouble which is to come into my life, I will try to do as you have told me. You will pray for me, will you not ? The thought you are doing so will help me——”

“ My child, I will often pray for you ; will pray that God’s peace may be ever with you.”

“ I must be going now,” I said hurriedly, for I saw afar off poor near-sighted Ropes peering distressfully for me through the crowd, and I knew it was time for us to be leaving. “ I cannot stay longer ; but oh ! how I thank you ! how I wish I could meet you again ; but we are leaving Venice almost immediately.”

“ Then you must do without me,” he said quietly ; “ remember God gives, and withholds His outward helps just as He thinks fit. To-day you needed human sympathy, needed direction, so He sent me to you, but you must learn to do without them if it is His will. Remember, He is sufficient for all things. My child, it will not hurt you to have

an old man's, even to have a Romish priest's, blessing before we part."

I sank on my knees before him, and I shall never forget the sacred words he pronounced over me.

When I rose, I put both my hands in his, but could not speak, the tears were so near the surface. We might never meet again, but I already loved him, this old man, who had come to me in my need, and who had lifted me out of my grief. "I am sorry I may never see your kind face again," at last I faltered.

"*Here* you may not, but," he answered, "but——" and once more came that bright upward look, which was so infinitely touching in the face of one so near his heavenly home.

"God grant it," I replied, and turned hurriedly away to meet my companion.

There was a very shocked expression in Ropes' face, and an evident wish to talk as we turned out of the subdued light of the old church into the brilliant mid-day glare of the piazza; but I was not inclined for conversation. I was very grateful for the help and guidance which had come almost miraculously to me, was very full of earnest pleadings that I might be able to live up to what I had just been taught, so we paced under the colonnades in

silence. They were comparatively deserted, the crowds in the church had thinned the piazza, and there were only small groups here and there sitting at the doors of the cafés drinking cool beverages and eating ices. I was too preoccupied to notice, as I usually did, every beautiful and picturesque effect in that charming part of perhaps the most charming city in Europe; and was turning into the narrow alley which led to our hotel, when a sigh, a very "please-notice-me" sort of sigh from Ropes roused me from my meditation. I turned and looked at her. I think I have never described her, so will do so now. She was a thin, middle-aged woman with a florid complexion, thickish nose, and red hair, of an eminently respectable English appearance, with an honest look in her pale-blue eyes which had always made me like her. She had been Mrs. Davenel's maid for twenty years, and had a sort of feudal adoration for the family rare to find in these radical days, but not so strange when we know that her father had been one of the lodge-keepers, and so she had scarcely known any other world than the small one at The Chase.

Mrs. Davenel had, in her hard way, a very true regard for Ropes, whom she used to call a "faithful old fool;" but this did not prevent her from

bullying her. I believe for her, in a passion, to give Ropes warning, and for Ropes whimperingly to refuse it, saying: "There's no use in your giving me warning, ma'am, for I won't take it—I mean to live and die in the Davenel service," were common incidents to both of them, and were patent to the household, by reason of the red and swollen eyelids Ropes would hoist as a flag of distress for hours afterwards. She idolized Master Horace most of all. My engagement at first gave her great pain, a duchess being, in her estimation, scarcely good enough for him; but when she saw how necessary I was to him, she, not personally disliking me, also reflecting I should myself soon turn into a Davenel, set about investing me with the perfections which she deemed only appertained to that exalted family. She willingly trotted about with me sightseeing whenever Mrs. Davenel could spare her; but I put her allegiance to a great test when I took her, as was my wont, into one church after another.

Ropes was very mixed in her religious views. At home she went on Sunday mornings to hear Mr. Herbert, because she considered it was the proper thing for the family (of which she quite considered herself a member) to show themselves at

church; also, it was more "genteel" than chapel. But she indemnified herself for this in the evenings, when the prim maid would repair to one or another dissenting place of worship, and feed her soul on the most vehement form of ranting.

It showed there was in her, as there is in most of us, a leaven of lawlessness, which, as she did not control it, needed this harmless outlet. The two foremost articles in her mundane creed were: first, fidelity—absolute unhesitating fidelity—to the Davenels; the second, abhorrence of Popery. She suffered torments while we were abroad from the inevitable contact with those sly idolators, as she termed them; and I believe she looked on her hoped-for return to her village Boanerges as a sort of religious haven, from which she trusted she would never again be called on to part.

I forgot this idiosyncrasy of hers as I said, when sigh number two burst from her:

"I am afraid, Ropes, I have been very selfish, have kept you out till you are quite tired; but it is almost for the last time. After we leave Venice, and are once more in the country, I can go about alone, as I so often used to do at Savona."

"It is not that, Miss Muriel; I like doing

things for you, you are always so civil and kind. But, ma'am, may I speak to you of what I have heard and seen with my very own eyes? I have a duty to my family," said Ropes, drawing her prim slim form up till it was more like a poker than ever.

"Assuredly," I answered, "you may say whatever you like to me. You know I never take offence at anything. What is it, Ropes?"

"Ah, ma'am," said Ropes, giving vent to sigh number three, till I began to wonder how many more lay in reserve for my benefit; "ah, ma'am, you will never make a true Davenel till you learn to take offence properly, and though we shall all love you, you will never be really one of us."

"I am also too short, and not half dignified enough," I said, laughing.

"Ma'am," said Ropes, infinitely shocked, "I would never presume to find fault with you; besides, God made us, Miss Muriel, and all He makes is very beautiful—you and me and all of us; we are like very lovely flowers in His sight."

I gazed blankly the while at poor Ropes' very plain and homely physiognomy, trying to fill mine with assent to her doctrine, lest I should wound her by a contrary expression. Ropes went on:

"Master Horace, too, thinks you perfection. The other day, when I made bold to say to him how sweet you were but how I wished you were as tall as my mistress, he made a queer face and said: 'Ropes, "man wants but little here below, nor wants that little long."' So you see, Miss Muriel, he means to try to be content with your being so small, so you and me must not fret about it."

I again laughed. Ropes often did me the good turn of rousing my risible faculties.

"But, Miss Muriel," said Ropes, again becoming exceedingly dolorous, "that is not what I wanted to talk about." She paused, and with an almost aggravation of solemnity, proceeded: "When I knew it was time for us to leave that Pagan temple yonder, I sought about for you in the crowd. Well, I came across Mr. Jenkins, that tall footman in the Vandeleur family—those people my mistress and you liked so much in the Riviera. I knew he could see better over the people than me, so I says to him: 'Good morning, Mr. Jenkins; have you seen Miss Sterling, my young lady, in the crowd?'"

"'Oh yes I have,' he answers, with a nasty twinkle in his eyes. He is a low sort of young man, Miss Muriel, and I don't think much of him, which makes it all the sadder. 'Oh yes I have,' he says;

'she is there, in yonder corner, a confessin' of her sins to an old popish priest. You go past those three pillars, and then turn sharp to the left, and you'll see her hard at it.' Miss Muriel, you might have knocked me down with a feather, but I remembered my family, and drawing myself up just as I see Mrs. Davenel does, I says: 'Mr. Jenkins,' says I, 'my young lady would never go to demean herself so far as to confess her sins to anyone, much less a furriner. No doubt this is some friend of ours she is talking to; we know plenty of people everywhere; besides, Mr. Jenkins, my young lady has no sins to confess.' He laughed; so curtsying to him as stiff as you please, I left him."

"Oh Ropes!" I exclaimed, struggling to keep down the merriment which would have so scandalised her, "how could you say I have no sins?"

"No sins, ma'am," repeated Ropes sturdily, "which the likes of him could understand. Footmen's sins are very different from young ladies' sins, and can't be spoken of together. Well, Miss Muriel, sure enough I did find you just where he said, and it was worse than I thought, for as I came near you, you went down on your knees and prayed to that false idolator with his long petticoats flapping about him,

though why them priests should be afraid to show their legs, like any other honest man, I can't understand. Miss Muriel dear"—and here good faithful Ropes' china-blue eyes absolutely watered in a fervour of eagerness as she went on still more hurriedly—"I am not a tell-tale, and so I shall say nothing to Mistress or to Master Horace; but please don't become a papist; it would break our hearts at The Chase to have a popish Mrs. Davenel burning incense all over the place, and filling the niches with painted idols, and the house with evil priests. Promise me you won't talk to that cunning wicked old man again."

We were at the hotel by this time, but I signed to Ropes to turn again down the alley, so that I might have time to answer. It was all very ludicrous, but real earnestness demands respect and deserves fair attention, so hiding the amusement I could not but feel inwardly, I replied to her with the utmost gravity:

"Dear good Ropes, I will at once and for ever set your mind at rest. First, I wish you to know that you may always tell Captain and Mrs. Davenel anything you like; I have no secrets from them, and shall probably myself tell them I met this kind old clergyman, and how I had a most interesting con-

versation with him, for which I hope both to be happier and better, and if I meet him again—of which I fear there is small likelihood—I shall introduce him to them. Ropes, will it cure you of one of your many prejudices when I tell you, that that old priest never even asked me of what religion I am, never spoke of his, is making no further effort to see me, and only gave me good advice such as Mr. Herbert would give me if I went to him, or—” here I made a gulp, it being hard to get out—“or which perhaps Mr. Stot (Ropes’ Boanerges) might give you? Now one thing more to comfort you. I am quite satisfied with my own Church, and, as you know, in England have *no* wish to go to any other place of worship”—I said this rather emphatically, and Ropes winced, and I rather enjoyed her doing so—“but here abroad, where our Church is scarcely open even on Sundays, where it is so often what one cannot quite like, I am very glad to go into these Romish churches and say my prayers there. Praying in His House and among His people always helps us, dear Ropes; and though you and I never wish to be Romanists, we should learn to feel that there are, thank God, many good and holy people among them. Ropes, I would be very thankful if you and I could be even half as good,

and holy, and as near God, as the priest who has just now been speaking to me."

I stopped, and the tears rushed to my eyes, as Ropes and I now toiled up the innumerable stairs which led to our apartments. Ropes at first made no answer. The narrow-minded are not to be convinced speedily, if ever; but just as we gained the door of the *salon*, she cried:

"Miss Muriel, I am beholden to you for explaining all so clearly; many ladies would not take so much trouble. I am much more easy about you now; but, indeed, it is better not to go into them papish buildings too much," and with a solemn Lord Burleighish shake of the head, which expressed manifold and unutterable things, she disappeared into her own sanctum.

I entered our charming sitting-room, which was cool and dark and most refreshing after the outdoor glare, the persiennes being closed and the air redolent with the sweet scent of flowers. Mrs. Davenel was writing home one of those volumes of directions for Anastasia's benefit which, I believe, always temporarily reduced her to the verge of despair. Horace was lounging in the depths of a huge easy-chair, from which, through a small opening in the shutters, he could obtain a peep

of the Lagune, and the church of Santa Maria della Salute, which was almost *vis-à-vis* our hotel.

He had overexerted himself on the preceding day, so had stayed in that morning to recruit for the afternoon's work. He looked up very discontentedly when I walked in, and said :

"How long you have been, Muriel ; I thought you were never coming back ; you seem always away now."

My conscience smote me, for it was quite true that latterly I had availed of every reasonable pretext I could for absenting myself. Was it an almost unacknowledged wish on my part to enjoy my liberty while it was still mine ? I did not seek to excuse myself, as only yesterday I might have done, but went up to him, saying :

"I fear I have been very long away this morning, dear Horace, and I promise I will not be so again. I am so sorry you were not with me to share my pleasure ; you must try to go out with me to-morrow morning, or else I think I would rather stay at home."

The annoyed look passed from his face as he resettled himself in his chair, remarking :

"You had better not put it in my power to keep you with me, or I believe I would never let

you out, I miss you so awfully. Now come and sit here and tell me all you have done, it is not luncheon time for another half-hour yet."

It was his great pleasure, whenever I returned from any outing, that I should make a story out of all that I had seen. I used to begin at the very beginning and go on in regular sequence, and often before I came to the end would find Mrs. Davenel had drawn near to listen too. I at once tossed my hat on to a neighbouring sofa, and, drawing a small chair near his, began with a feeling of interest in my work, a wish to make it successful in imparting pleasure, which was born of my present good intentions, and which I daresay made me more fluent than ordinary. I did not do more than refer to a very interesting conversation I had had with an old priest whom I had met in St. Mark's, though that allusion was enough to divest it of all mystery and secrecy; but I enlarged on the beauty of the procession and the exquisite harmony of the music.

"Have you brought any of it away in your head?" asked Horace.

"I think I have, and I will try and give you some of it this evening, but one performer can only give you a feeble idea of what it really was. I found out whose music it was, but even if I can

get it, it needs a full orchestral choir to give it the real effect."

"It has had full effect on you, anyway," he remarked. "Your eyes look brighter, and altogether you seem more like your old self than you have been for days. Music has a wonderful effect over you."

"It is not the music alone," I said, as I spoke in a lower key. "In the talk I told you I had, many things were said to me which have made me wish to be different, to be better. I have been restless and fidgety lately, Horace. I want to improve and make others happier."

"There has been a difference lately," he observed, "but I am not sure that it has been all your fault. Anyway, please don't accuse yourself; penitence is always such an uncomfortable performance. If you were to become sanctimonious you would lose half your originality. I don't want you to be a piece of perfection. Indeed, when you are faulty you come down more to my level, more within the reach of us commonplace people."

"Oh don't you wish me to be better?" I said disappointedly.

"I only wish one thing about you," he said, looking intently at me, "and when you give me that I shall be absolutely satisfied with you."

How I longed to snatch my hand from his. But I would not do so, and answered softly :

“I will try.”

We were alone, Mrs. Davenel having left the room, so he drew me to him, kissing me tenderly as he said :

“I had best let you grow better your own way, my darling, for I can see this, that when you do so you hold yourself less aloof from me than when you are, as you say, ‘selfish.’”

We were all rather talkative at lunch that day. Mrs. Davenel made me repeat much of what I had already told her son, she not having heard my previous account. I told them of Ropes’ fears lest I should be a papist.

Mrs. Davenel pleaded guilty to her having herself felt anxious on that score, during the beginning of our stay abroad.

“Then why have you not continued so, Madam Davenel,” said Horace; “for Muriel goes quite as much to the Romish churches as she did?”

“Because,” said the old lady, looking kindly at me, “I am learning to know Muriel better than I did, and I see it is not in her to change easily. She is very fixed both in her principles and in her affections.”

This was very affectionate, but oh! so tact-

less. Horace pushed back his chair impatiently, saying:

"You don't mean it, mother; but you are giving a most repulsive aspect to Muriel's character. A woman who is fixed and unchangeable is not lovable; not the gentle yielding creature who most wins our love, who will end by giving love for love."

I knew too well what it was so annoyed him in his mother's speech; and she, too, regretted it when too late; but in her security about the present she had a good deal forgotten the past. I tried to give a playful turn to the conversation as I said:

"So you want us poor women, Horace, to be like limp pieces of blotting-paper, ready to take any impression, good or bad? Would you rob us of all individuality?"

"Whether I would or not, you will always keep yours, I fear," he said gloomily; and for the next hour would scarcely speak to either of us.

It was like this so often. The little structure of cheerfulness which I would pile up with such care would be overthrown by some chance unlucky speech of his mother's, and then he would sulk and brood. However, full of my good resolutions, I would not be daunted that afternoon, and by the time we had

settled ourselves in the gondola, he had returned to his ordinary good-humour.

It was not so fine as in the morning. The noontide brilliancy had given place to a somewhat cloudy sky, which boded a storm, but which did us the good service of shielding us from the sun. We both loved much the being outside the city in the open sea, which to-day was curling itself into quite respectable little waves, while the fresh breeze which swept across them gave us a deliciously invigorated feeling.

Horace had allowed me to choose the gondola which was to be ours while we were in Venice, and I had picked out one less smart than its fellows, because *Novanta Sei* (the boatmen here are known by their numbers), the head gondolier, had both a poverty-stricken as well as an honest look in the thin eager face, which had attracted me to him.

To be chosen by the rich Inglese was a godsend to him, and his gratitude to me was intense. Even when Horace gave him any orders he never obeyed comfortably, till he saw they were what I also wished. To-day I told Horace the gondola must go just where I liked; so, after asking Giuseppe (for I would call him by his name) after his sick wife,

to whom Ropes and I had taken sundry small things, I informed him that his business on this day was to let us see as much as we could of the funeral procession, which, after going in state down the canal, was now on its way to the cemetery-island.

"I want to see all I can of everything," I finished, and gave myself up to enjoyment.

Giuseppe managed even better than I expected, for on our return to Venice he entangled our gondola in among the state-barges, so that we meekly returned thither in the wake of the most magnificent of them, which was filled with old cardinals and bishops in their gorgeous vestments of scarlet and purple and gold. We even saw them with slow and dignified steps leave their boat and ascend the narrow staircase beneath the Bridge of Sighs, which leads into the ducal palace.

It was in its rich colouring and ceremonial pomp like a bit of old Venice, and till we emerged into the broad lagune, and I looked at Horace's and my eminently nineteenth-century costumes, it was difficult to realize that we were not some Venetian lady and gentleman of the mediæval times, returning home after witnessing some great Church pageant.

"I am very sorry," I said, and heaved a big sigh.

"Sorry for what?" asked Horace, who had thoroughly enjoyed my enthusiasm.

"Sorry we did not live four hundred years ago;" and then, feeling the absurdity of wishing to be alive then as well as now, I burst out laughing as I went on: "You would have made a very respectable Venetian, Horace, with your stately height and your fair colouring; but I, a dark scrap like me, I should have been an anachronism among Titian's and Velasquez' noble-looking dames. Yet I think I would have liked to have lived in a more picturesque world than this. We are all so horridly utilitarian; we have cut and pared down poor beauty till she is lost in the meagre proportions we have assigned her, and when we do play at art we cannot rise above stiff, staring, unbending sunflowers, and dull dark rooms, without warmth of colouring; while our women thatch their heads with bushy, jutting-out fringes instead of ideas, and widen their shoulders with horrible puffs of the hideous green with which they swathe their forms in straight ungraceful folds."

"It is only the people," remarked Horace with the lazy composure with which he often toned down my vehemence, "it is only the people who have lost the savour of the salt of commonsense who run into extremes. There is plenty of beauty left in

the world, and plenty of admirers of it left too. You are only going through the usual phase of regretting the past which Venice gives to people; but it will not last, and certainly not if you remember that those who dared to think for themselves in those old days, generally did so in the quiet retirement of the somewhat ascetic dungeons we groped in only yesterday. My dear child, believe me, the present time is by far the best and the most comfortable. I certainly don't wish to hark back again, even if I had to exchange my 'dark scrap' for some bulky Venetian dame, with well-fed, substantial form."

We went on jesting and laughing, I praising the past, he defending the present, till we found ourselves once more at the hotel, which we entered in company with Mrs. Davenel, who had just returned from some visits which she had paid on foot, in preference to encountering the perils by sea.

The first thing we saw on the table in our *salon* was a pile of English letters. We had had none for some time, so pounced on them eagerly. I was deep in Durnford gossip when an exclamation from Horace roused my attention.

"Good God!" he ejaculated, "poor Stewart's dying. How horrible!"

I rose, the sheets of paper falling from my hands, and stood motionless, as if spell-bound. Mrs. Davenel ran up to him, exclaiming:

“Oh Horace, what is it? Tell me quickly.”

There was a pause—a terrible pause. Those pauses of awful suspense must I think shorten our journey through life, so do they exhaust vital energy. But now came the blessed words:

“No, it is not Stewart! Anastasia’s wretched writing made me mistake. But indeed it is sad enough as it is. Poor Huddart, the new bailiff, has been bitten by a mad dog, and is dying of hydrophobia. I am very sorry. Anastasia adds, in a still more illegible postscript, that Stewart, whose name now looks like Huddart, is such a help; and they do not know what they will do when he leaves next week.”

“I knew everything would go wrong during my absence,” said Mrs. Davenel. “It is full time I was home again. Nothing of all this would have occurred if I had been there.”

I heard them both talking as if they were miles away from me—the shock had been so great I could not yet take in the relief. It was the horror of the possibility of death in connection with him which filled me with despair. I dimly understood

that it was averted; but it could have been, and that idea was torture. They now looked at me, and, startled by my appearance, came to me in extreme distress, crying: "Muriel—dear Muriel! it is all well. Don't look like that!"

There may have been something in my eyes or face which terrified them, but I don't know. I still heard their voices as through a thick cloud, and then feeling I must be alone I turned to the door, but would have fallen if Horace had not caught me and supported me to the sofa.

Then I awoke as from a trance, and burst into convulsive tearless sobs, shaking from head to foot. "Oh thank God!" I gasped. "Thank God for His great mercy!" and I said no more.

When I had recovered myself, I saw Horace was not near me. His mother, looking deeply troubled, was by my side, but he was at the other end of the large room, looking from the window. Alas! I could see in the face half turned to us the hard bitter look I had so learned to dread.

I was so sorry for my want of control, but indeed I could not help it. It had all been too sudden.

"What shall I do?" I whispered to his mother. "Help me if you can."

"Horace," she said, trembling, for she always

feared his moods, "Muriel is much vexed with herself for giving way as she has done. She is so tender-hearted she cannot help feeling things; and Faulkner was always so kind to her."

Horace left the window and came to us, evidently resolving to appear composed. "I understand, mother; it is quite natural. It was a great shock, and unnerved me too for the moment."

The words came in cold measured accents from his lips, but I saw in him the same fixed resolve there had been on the Arbutis Ridge—to see nothing, to know nothing, to appear to guess nothing. His face was ashy pale as he spoke, and I shrank from the cold look.

"I am a great goose," I faltered. "I suppose it was the sudden reaction from the fun and nonsense we had had. And at first I could not, but now I do feel the blessed relief that Mr. Stewart is unhurt. I am deeply grieved for Huddart and that poor wife of his."

I have often had to exercise self-control in my young life, but never more so than then. Every nerve was quivering, every pulse throbbing, yet I rose from the sofa and begged for further details, and enlarged on them till the hard expression in the sad face before me was more softened.

That conversation with the old priest must have been sent to me to help me now, and the thoughts it had raised in me gave me courage and strength.

There is no doubt that this revelation of my real feelings, which was perhaps inevitable, threw a painful element into the intercourse between me and my betrothed—on his side increased the jealousy which played so strong a part in his passionate but selfish love for me, and made me only the more shrink from one who, in not letting me be open with him, proved how little he really understood my nature. However, I went on doing my best, and outwardly things were the same as ever. News came the next day of poor Huddart's death, which much saddened us, though in my heart rose a constant psalm of thanksgiving that the first awful horror was not true, and that Faulkner was still among the living.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WEDDING-DAY APPROACHES.

EVENTS were now marching on with rapid feverish strides. Venice was a bright spot in the horizon of our memory, and we had already been one or two days at Milan. In another week we were to be at the hotel at Baveno, and there Mr. Davenel was to meet us, and in one short week after the marriage was to be; the rest of the party were to return to England, my husband and I were to proceed to the Villa Varco, about two miles from Baveno, which Auguste had chosen for us, and which was being arranged with the utmost luxury for our reception.

I could no longer evade the impediment of a maid. One was to arrive from London and to be awaiting us at Lake Maggiore, with some of the

fine things which were being chosen for me, with no doubt taste and care, by some friends of Mrs. Davenel's, and for which I cared so little, though I did not let this appear.

I am afraid mother felt the not being with me at such a time, but when I wrote to her all would be easier for me if her sweet eyes were not watching me, or her kind sympathy within my reach, she acquiesced in my decision, that dear mother, whom I never loved so much as when I denied myself her presence—whom I had to banish even from my thoughts, lest I should fail in the self-restraint I had imposed on myself.

I always made myself think of Horace now as "my future husband." I deferred to him more than ever, sought his society instead of absenting myself, as latterly I used to do, and so fatigued myself by early rising, by incessant occupation, that, wearied out, my head no sooner sank on my pillow than thought was lost in sleep. Perhaps this was not the high calm victory over self which the old priest had told me was to be my aim, but maybe it was the best I could do just then. Each morning as I rose I thought with terror how soon night would come, and another day be gone. I clung with painful regret to each hour as it sped

by ; I lived only in the present, except when the future was compelled on my unwilling notice.

Horace was quite different to me ; he seemed to live in expectation, he was so sure that once we were married all must be well ; he never doubted that once I was his my whole love would go out to him. I did not satisfy him in the present, for I shrank from every approach to sentiment, from every demonstration of affection, though in all else I omitted nothing which could please, giving up my whole time, and thought, and life to him. .

I began to feel almost more for him than for myself, began to feel for the disappointment which I feared would be his when he saw his wife devoted, obedient, faithful, as it was my earnest wish to be, but not loving. Sometimes though, my pity enabled me to throw into my manner a gentleness, almost a tenderness, which went very near to the real thing, and which would I trusted, even in the dreaded future, make him almost happy. I was mistaken in thinking this : a husband who really loves his wife is never satisfied with anything short of love, but my hope that he might be, helped me, so it was a good thing that I was able to indulge it. I seem to have such a confused remembrance of those few days preceding our arrival at Baveno,

but one or two things stand out in bright relief against the otherwise dark background.

I recollect, as in a dream, Horace and I walking round Milan Cathedral in the half darkness of a summer's night. It was a fancy of mine that same walk, and he, poor fellow, had an almost childish pleasure in gratifying any whim I might express. I wanted an exaggeration even of its enormous size to content my cravings for immensity. The deep shadows and uncertain outlines which night's obscurity lent to it, enlarged and magnified it to an unearthly degree. And as we looked up to the structure of marble towering over us, it was easy to fancy that more than human power had raised it there as a vast monument to God's glory, while I received an impression of it which no daylight view could give me.

The next thing which emerges with clear outline from my remembrance of those days, is my first sight of the Italian lakes.

We knew several people on board the steamer which was taking us from Como to Bellagio; among them was a merry cheerful family of Hibernian descent, who seeing fun in everything, would have turned Mont Blanc itself into a joke if they had

seen it just then. We were all talking and laughing, the boat meanwhile paddling swiftly onwards, when suddenly we rounded a corner, and there were the snow mountains before us!

Exclamations of delight burst from all, but as they grew used to the view, the farcical talk circulated as before. I could not bear it, so stole away from them and stood alone, as if I could never see enough. I have since then visited grander scenes, but the first impression made on me that afternoon is greater than I can ever feel again.

It was not so much what I looked at, as the feelings which it raised within me which were so overpowering. The dazzling whiteness, the awful stainless purity of those mountain heights, spoke to me in language of unspeakable eloquence. I regarded my own miserable self with greater abhorrence than I had ever felt before. My whole soul went out into one unutterable longing that I could free myself from a present so full of weary conflict, of saddening failure, to pass into a future which I pictured to be like the scene before me, a future whose perfection—high, and pure, and spotless—would absorb me into itself, bidding me rest for ever in the arms of eternal peace.

"This satisfies you, Muriel," said Horace, who, always watching me, had drawn near me, though I had not perceived his doing so.

I started. I had forgotten him, and everyone in my deep thought. "Yes," I said, "it satisfies me perfectly, completely. And you?"

I turned my eyes to him for one moment, and read the unquiet wistful look in his.

"I?" he responded. "I am neither artistic nor enthusiastic, but even I am learning by slow degrees to feel with you. I cared, like Gallio, for none of these things till I tried to read them with your eyes; but now you are teaching me."

"Is to appreciate the beautiful so very hard a lesson to learn?" I said, smiling. "Surely you do not need teaching to admire this?"

"To-day I do not," he replied. "I do not know why it is, but this scenery affects me powerfully—gives me a longing to be different, to be better. Of course this is an absurd feeling, and I would fain be rid of it." A look of great pain came into his face as he continued: "But I shall never alter, it is too late."

I put my hand on his arm, I looked up in his face pleadingly; I could scarcely bring out the words in the energy of my feeling.

"Don't say that, dear Horace; don't say you will never alter; and don't try to rid yourself of these higher feelings. I am so glad, so thankful they come to us. They are God given, for He means, He wishes that His beautiful world should speak to us; let us try to be better for what we see to-day. The impression will not fade if we will let it remain."

He looked at me with intense affection, but the gloom did not pass out of his face as he said:

"It will not fade with you, who every day are trying to live more and more unselfishly, trying to live higher; but with me——"

He paused, and turning from me walked abruptly away. Soon he joined in the foolish conversation at the other end of the boat, and I heard with distress that forced laugh of his which told me how far he was from either peace or happiness.

I tried once more to throw myself into the train of thought which I felt was doing me such good, but the power of abstraction, the delight of enthusiasm, were now dulled within me. Even the snow mountains did not look the same, now I saw them through the medium of the trouble which Horace's words always roused in me. There came back to my mind a conversation which I had had long long

ago with Mr. Stewart, in which he said one jarring element could spoil the effect of the most perfect scenery; and I felt how true his words were as I turned from what had so delighted me, and joined the others, taking sufficient share in their conversation to free myself from the charge of sentimentality, which would have been attributed to me if I had remained any longer by myself. Still that one half-hour, when I lived in a higher world as it were, was not without its use, and will never fade from my recollection.

A few days after we were approaching Baveno by water—were sailing up to it in the calm light of a summer's evening. Its sweet serene beauty, not so overpoweringly majestic as the scenery round Bellagio, but infinitely more soothing and restful, was much enjoyed by us all. We had the pleasure of anticipation as well, for it was probable that Mr. Davenel might already be at the hotel awaiting us; and there, indeed he was, leaning over the parapet of the garden, watching our approach, and looking very English and homelike as he waved his hat in greeting.

Mrs. Davenel was almost excited. She had never before been separated from her husband, and absence had made her miss the kindness and love

which she so looked upon as a matter of course in all the years of her married life, that she did not know what it was to her till she had to do without it.

Mr. Davenel was quite confused when his wife exclaimed how delighted she was to see him again, so little was he used to any, even the slightest demonstration of affection on her part.

He was in raptures over Horace's improved looks.

"My dear boy, I have not seen you like this for years. You don't call yourself an invalid now, surely? But where is Muriel?"

I had hung back till their first greetings were over, but now gladly stepped forward. It gave me such pleasure to meet the dear old man once more, and to feel the warmth with which he met me.

After kissing me affectionately, he held me at arm's length, scanning me rather closely, and finally shook his head with disappointment.

"The child," he said, turning to the others with something of reproach in his tones, "has not lost her sweet expression—nay, it is even sweeter than it was!—but her face seems all eyes. It has grown so small. Do you know how thin you are, Muriel? You are a shadow of your former self. You used to be as plump as a partridge, and now you are

dreadfully slim and elegant-looking much more than I like to see."

Horace and his mother looked at me as people regard an object they have seen every day—unnoting—but whom they now inspect from a new point of view.

I burst out laughing at their scrutinising faces, and cried: "Why, of course I am all eyes; I never travelled before, and my whole existence of late has been the most beautiful sight-seeing, so that no wonder if my eyes have become perpetual and staring notes of admiration. Then, Mrs. Davenel has let me go out morning, noon, and night; so it is not very surprising if I have become thin. I am rather glad of it. I used so to fear I should become too fat; and there is nothing more grotesque than a little stout roundabout woman. You ought all to be truly thankful I am escaping such a calamity."

"I have let her, perhaps, do too much, Edward," said Mrs. Davenel apologetically; "but she wished so to see everything, and has never complained of being tired: however, she will be able to rest now. There will be no more tearing about for the next four months at least."

Horace did not speak, but his eyes never moved

from my face, and feeling exceedingly uncomfortable I hastened to turn the conversation by asking eagerly for home news.

"I have a hundred questions to make to you; I want to know about all and everyone."

We were now sitting by the large open window of our pretty *salon*, waiting till our things were unpacked. It was too late for table d'hôte, so we were to dine by ourselves—a pleasant arrangement for that evening, as we had so much to talk about. I never saw Mr. Davenel so beaming. His wife had not once snubbed him, and he positively basked in the sunshine of her good temper!

"Oh, we have all been as well as possible," he answered. "Of course there was that terrible business about poor Huddart; it was most sad and painful; but we won't speak of that to-night. Kitty is blooming, prettier than ever I think, and in the seventh heaven of happiness because Stewart has delayed his going to Canada for three weeks, so that he may look after things while I am away. Katherine, you don't know what he has been all this winter; it would have been dreadful but for him, we should have moped so, and yet I never feel as if he himself were happy."

I had been idly picking to pieces some flowers

which lay on my lap, but now raised my head quickly ; however, when I saw Horace's glance still intent on me, I turned with feigned indifference to the view before me, though my whole heart hung on each syllable as it fell from Mr. Davenel's lips in the slow hesitating way peculiar to him. "Yes," he added, "I think he wanted as much cheering as we did ; he has not been well, and his spirits are not really so good as he tries to let appear. He puts it down to having no work, and says laziness is a positive misfortune for him ; but I have my own idea, and that is," said Mr. Davenel, lowering his voice and turning softly to his wife, "that he has never ceased fretting after poor Mary, and misses her, especially in the old home. He certainly is more faithful than most men."

I felt the half sneer on Horace's face, felt the compressed lines round Mrs. Davenel's mouth—felt them as much as if I saw them ; felt the painful ludicrousness of this speech to us, and specially now ; yet I still looked steadily before me with, I believe, an unchanged expression.

"How is Anastasia?" I asked, the calmness of my voice surprising even me.

"I never saw her better in my life," was the prompt reply. "I really believe having something

to do has made a new woman of her. You had better give her more to do in the future, Katherine; it will help you and do her good."

"It seems to me," said Mrs. Davenel, with her old touchy manner well on her again, "that you all do better without me than with me. I am not wanted here, or at home, or anywhere."

Her husband stooped forward, laying his hand on hers: "My dear, I want you, and home is never the same to me without you."

"Thank you; I believe you have missed me a little," she said quickly, and then fearing we should notice the tears which sprang to her eyes, she rose and left us to "get ready for dinner," as she stiffly affirmed.

We looked at one another involuntarily after she was gone.

"She seems changed," said the old man with a glad light in his eyes; "she is gentler and different from what she was."

"Oh, I have worked that for you," said Horace in his sarcastic way; "she sees at last that a devoted husband is more comfortable than an undutiful son. I believe I should have worried her to death all these months if Muriel, like a ministering angel, had not stepped in and soothed her at intervals. But

nothing will do her real good while she fidgets so and is so lonely."

"I don't like to hear you talk of your mother in that way, Horace," said Mr. Davenel with almost dignity. Could it be that his freedom all these months had taught him to assert himself, to feel his own strength? It was very probable, for Anastasia, weak in her extreme docility, and Mr. Stewart, generous in his consciousness of superior intellect and force of character, would be just the people to defer to him in every possible way, and so perhaps for the first time for many years he had been really master, and had now the courage of his opinions.

Horace looked half surprised and half amused, but recognising the power that should be, that should always have been, he muttered some sort of apology. Mr. Davenel, loving peace, gladly accepted it, and soon after rose to leave the room. I think he wanted a few more words with his wife while her mood was so genial.

I was following him when Horace detained me. "Come here," he said, taking hold of me and leading me to one of the windows, so that the light fell fully on me. "Let me look well at the Muriel who they say is so altered—who seems a shadow of her former self."

"Nonsense, Horace," I said, trying to draw myself away from him. "I daresay I was just as thin when we left The Chase, only we were all so absorbed about your important lordship that we had no time to notice anyone else. Besides, I don't mind it; I like to be thin. I look in proper tennis condition. To have eyes starting out of one's head with fatigue, to have hollow features and attenuated figure, is just the right thing for a young lady who wishes to be thought a proficient at that noble game. Despite my thinness, I am well enough in health; what more can you want, you unreasonable man? Do you remember the compliments that German count, whom you so hated, paid to my delicate and refined appearance? But I think you would have hated him still more if he had said the charming English fräulein was coarse, and resembled a milkmaid."

I rattled on, hoping to divert him, but he kept looking at me most uncomfortably.

"Yes," he said, not even noticing my words, "my father is quite right. You are strangely altered. Your face is nearer beauty than it ever was before, but it is a sad sort of beauty I do not like to see. In the midst of all your nonsense, and though you are smiling with that pretty smile which is so peculiarly yours, your eyes never lose their sad

wistful expression. You have become slight and fragile, more like a spirit than the healthy bright girl you were when I first knew you. My darling, will you never go back to what you were? When you are mine, altogether mine, cannot my passionate love content you? There is not a whim of yours I will not gratify, if only it will bring back to your face the happy joyous look which so charmed me. But I must have faith and patience—all must and shall be well when we are married.”

Poor fellow, did he really think this? I did not contradict him, and perhaps he was right in this, that it would be better for both of us when all was irrevocably fixed, when sacred vows bound us the one to the other, when this feverish waiting time was over. I leant my head against his shoulder, the first time I had ever done so voluntarily, as I said:

“I think it will be better, dear Horace, when the next few days are over. When I am your wife I will do all I can to get strong, really strong, to please you.”

I had never used the words “your wife” to him before. I was almost startled by the pleasure they gave him. Happily the waiters now entered the room to prepare dinner, so our *tête-à-tête* had to end, and I was able to get away to my own room.

After dinner, which was a very cheerful meal, Mrs. Davenel called me to her, saying: "Muriel, Mr. Davenel has brought some parcels for you—gifts from The Chase. I have sent them to your room, so you may see them at your leisure. We are all going on the terrace, where you can join us when you like."

I thanked her, and went to inspect the new arrivals. Wedding presents were now no novelty to me. It is curious how little they are in proportion to the future needs of the bride. The greater the marriage, the grander and more numerous the gifts; whereas the poorer the match, the fewer and more insignificant are the contributions. I was going to be rich, going to have every moneyed wish gratified to the utmost, therefore I had already received a perfect plethora of both useful and useless things. Also, I never knew before how many people cared for me. It was wonderful how strange and hitherto unknown connections and relations sprang up on all sides, inditing me affectionate epistles, and sending me with effusion tributes of the love they had so carefully hidden till then. I might have been spoilt by all this, might have grown to believe that Muriel Sterling was really the charming person they seemed to think me, but that my coming prosperity was

so chastened and tempered by the peculiar circumstances of the case, that I thought little of the ovation paid to me.

My room was a pleasant bright little long slip of a chamber, with a small balcony facing the lake. It was almost dark, but in the dim obscurity I perceived a figure fitting to and fro, tidying and settling everything. It was my new maid Célestine, a dapper trim Frenchwoman with dark eyes, coal-black hair, and a microscopic waist, who had already possessed herself of me and my effects. I breathed a sigh of regret for my old independence as I went up to the table, where lay a heap of various-sized boxes.

A sudden burning flush rose to my face when I saw among them a small packet addressed to me in Mr. Stewart's clear and delicate writing. I felt I must be alone when I opened this, and now I knew why Mrs. Davenel had sent me to my room instead of making me show my gifts, as she usually did, to an admiring audience. It was very thoughtful and considerate of her. I told Célestine she might go out for half-an-hour, and then paced up and down the room for a few minutes, thinking sad, almost bitter thoughts.

Mr. Stewart had never written to me before;

there had been no occasion for him to do so; and now this first time he held communication with me was to send me a wedding present. Could I not have been spared this? Ah no! It was only reasonable that he, my future brother-in-law, should lay his gift also at my feet. The omission would have been remarked. I bit my lips to keep down the rising tears, then reapproached the table, opening all the other cases, and leaving that small one to the last, not even touching it with my fingers.

The pretty jewels and dainty ornaments for room and boudoir, so kindly thought of and chosen for me by Anastasia, Kitty, and other friends, were put aside and scarcely looked at the while, and then I turned to that wee-wee box, which seemed to me the all and only one there.

I slowly tore off its paper coverings, undid each seal with tender care, leaving writing and impress alike uninjured. It was a solitary last pleasure, this seeing his writing, this touching his gift; and being the last I must ever enjoy which was connected with him, I spun it out to the utmost. A morocco case now displayed itself, and within it was a locket with diamond monogram.

A blank feeling of disappointment took possession of me. Did he wish to make this the mere rich

offering, the commonplace—must be—costly present ? I would have liked something far simpler, plainer, something which would speak to me of him as this could never do. I opened the locket, and there beamed up to me the loveliest portrait of his dear Kitty which could possibly be. My tears fell thick and fast now. I was content, for much thought and loving care had been given to me in this exquisite memory of her, and through her of him. In this he had striven to knit still closer the one good holy link between us. Still I was not quite satisfied, I wanted more, as I looked eagerly for some words, some lines from him ; surely there could not be only the bare cold address, which said so little. No, there lay a small note near the case, which till now was unperceived. It was his first, it might be his last letter to me, and was as follows :

“I wish my present to you should be what you will really like, what will give you pleasure always, and I think this will. A clever artist has painted me two portraits of my child. One I send to you, the other goes abroad with me. Mine will serve to bring her sweet face to me when I am far away ; yours will be more of a treasure to you, when years

hence you may wish to recall what your Kitty was when you first met her. Muriel, I go away so peacefully this time, comforted by the thought that my darling will soon be under your care, learning from you all the sweet womanly virtues which make you so valued and loved. And now I will say no more, save that I pray God may bless you and Horace, in the future which lies before you, and that yours may be a good, a noble, and a happy life.

“I shall think much of you both.

“I am always your friend,

“FAULKNER STEWART.”

I pressed the dear words to my heart and lips, and then a wonderful calm stole over me. There was nothing in that brave good note to agitate and disturb; nothing that I might not show to all the world; and yet I knew that now and for ever, in the highest, best way, in the way which would jar against no earthly duty, which would only spur me on to higher things, we were always, and would always be, faithful to one another. I laid this note and his present reverently by. I went to my desk and wrote a few lines, such as he would wish to have, such as Horace would not mind my writing,

which should go on the morrow. I then stayed by my window, thinking deeply, calmly, almost restfully; afterwards I went and joined the others as they sat in the garden. I told them of all my presents and who they were from, and said next day they should see them. I spoke of the exquisite fidelity of Kitty's portrait, and of how her father could not have chosen anything I liked better. I was glad to see Horace looked pleased, when he heard me speak so unconcernedly. It was a wonderfully peaceful evening; no evil forebodings marred its quiet enjoyment as we discussed one subject after another. Presently the old couple rose and walked up and down the broad walk before us, leaving us *tête-à-tête*. Ah poor Horace, how well I remember that evening's talk with him; he was so kind, it was very pleasant being with him. It soothed the pain which I knew was somewhere, though I tried not to see it was in me—this speaking so gently together. I was so truly his friend that it was my earnest wish to contribute to his happiness all I could.

The moon rose over the water, flooding it with silvery light, and as we admired the beautiful scene we became silent. It was a silence which brought

us nearer each other far more than any talking could do. At last Mrs. Davenel came up to us, speaking quite gently, as if she too were brought under the spell of the beauty round us.

"It does seem a sin to leave this; but Horace, my dear, I fear you ought to go in now, it is getting chilly."

I believe he would have rebelled, but we all so combined against him, that for peace' sake he had to give in. As we slowly ascended the wide steps which lead up to the hotel verandah, Horace whispered to me:

"Muriel, a scene like this makes me think. I know that my prayers are worth nothing, but yours will be heard. Pray that we may be happy."

"I will," I answered, and that night I prayed more earnestly than ever. I soon fell asleep, but awoke before long, and lay there thinking till dawn began to break, when I rose, and wrapping some warm things round me, for the night was cold, I sat by the window to watch the sunrise. The lake before me was soon bathed in the radiance of coming day, the floods of crimson, purple, and gold succeeding each other in slow and graceful majesty, one tint melting into another almost imperceptibly;

and then, when light had fully come, when the witchery of its first shy appearance had given place to the full and perfect brilliancy of the risen orb, I went once more to bed and slept peacefully till Célestine aroused me.

Poor woman! she had been chiefly accustomed to fashionable, lazy, fine ladies, so it must have been trying, the waiting on a mistress who would not let her do enough for her, who would not be abjectly dependent and helpless.

"You make me nothing to do, mademoiselle," she said, in comic despair. "You make your own hair; you make me quit the room till your toilette is almost arranged."

I laughed, and assured her there was plenty of work for her.

"There are the innumerable boxes for you to unpack Célestine, which you brought with you. I have seen nothing in them yet, and Mrs. Davenel and I are going to inspect them this afternoon. I hope—I mean I daresay—the things won't all fit, and then you can alter, and cut, and contrive to your heart's content. You will find too much to do, I expect."

The little Frenchwoman evidently thought me an

unusual specimen of young ladyhood, but my liveliness commended me to her. She assured me naively that she thought I must have French blood in me, I was so little stiff and cold. We parted the best of friends as I ran down to breakfast, leaving her to settle the things which, during her absence from the room, I had purposely disarranged for her benefit, for I perceived I must now learn to be untidy, and put nothing by.

There was a discussion of the day's plans, when we had sufficiently done justice to the good things before us. We decided we would row across to Isola Bella that morning, Mrs. Davenel and all. It was so still and quiet, the water without a ripple, that her joining us was insisted on, though as usual, her fears rose at the mere mention of a boat. She and Mr. Davenel were to return from the island, while Horace and I went farther down the lake, till we wearied of it.

In the afternoon, the gentlemen had business arrangements to settle, so that all legalities might be properly accomplished for the ceremony, which was fixed for to-day week; while Mrs. Davenel and I were, as I had forewarned Célestine, to immerse ourselves in millinery—a prospect which filled me

with dismay, as it meant that, for a long weary interval, I must stand like an inanimate doll, trying on one beautiful robe after another, and making believe very hard that I enjoyed it all.

CHAPTER VII.

DE PROFUNDIS.

I WOULD fain linger longer over that cheerful breakfast-table. I would fain not step into that boat which waits for us on the placid waters of the lake. I say so now, when my whole soul is steeped in horror at the remembrance of that fatal morning; but then I dreaded nothing, I saw no gloom, no terror in that pleasant excursion. I had resolved to enjoy it, and to help to make the others enjoy it too. Quietly, calmly, I put on my hat, anticipating the feast of beauty which was to be ours. I saw no dark form hovering over us, ready to cast its baleful shadow in the shape of direful calamity. I was entirely unforeboding of evil. Mrs. Davenel was not able to be nervous in that huge boat and on that tranquil lake. An almost unnatural stillness reigned around. Not a breath stirred, and yet

it was not too hot, for an unusually violent thunder-storm had, soon after we got to bed on the preceding evening, cooled the air.

"If it could always be like this I should not mind boating so much," observed Mrs. Davenel, as we ascended the steps leading up to that fairy isle where time can pass so charmingly, and so swiftly.

"I don't like such a tub of a boat," said Horace ; "and I will take good care we never have such a one again, except when you come with us. I like something lighter and swifter—don't you, Muriel ?"

I agreed with him, and added, "I wished to be able to row, which I could not do in so heavy an affair ;" and then I displayed with some pride to Mr. Davenel, sundry blisters on the palms of my hands, which my achievements on Lake Como had already earned for me.

When we had fully explored the exquisite Isola Bella, and had declared, as people do declare on such occasions, that we could spend weeks and weeks there, we then as immediately declared we must go away at once, and hurried our departure after the manner of English folks, to whom "What shall we do next ?" plays so large a part in their restless lives, the *dolce far niente* being so impossible to most of us.

As we approached the landing-stage we perceived near the large boat Horace and I had so vilified, a small frail-looking bark with one man in it; it was waiting to take Mr. and Mrs. Davenel back to Baveno, while we went farther on. The old man rather wanted to go on with us, but his wife would never have consented to sail on any waters unaccompanied by some member of her family, whose presence she considered (though on what ground I know not, for neither Horace nor his father could swim) would better insure her safety.

As soon as Mrs. Davenel saw the smaller craft, she absolutely refused to stir from the spot whereon she was standing.

"What! go in that scrap of a boat? Trust Mr. Davenel and myself in that cockle-shell with only one boatman? Never! Either we must all return in that big boat, and you take it on afterwards, Horace, or I remain here on this island."

In vain we assured her it was quite safe; that in only a few minutes she would be once more on *terra firma*; that the water was smoother than a mill-pond, etc. She was quite resolved; so finally Horace decided they should take the large boat, and we should go in the smaller one. It was a long dis-

cussion. Mrs. Davenel equally feared the risk for us, but he was more resolute than she. Mr. Davenel and I remained perfectly passive. I thought the little boat would be far pleasanter, but I am thankful now to think that I pleaded nothing in its favour; nay, rather, I once said, *sotto voce*, to my betrothed, that I wondered if it were quite safe for a longish cruise, it looked so frail and rickety; at which I was so laughed at for my pains that I hazarded no further objection.

Finally the old couple got into their huge vessel, though Mrs. Davenel seemed thoroughly vexed and uncomfortable, and I feared that her husband would not have a too-pleasant time of it.

"That's a blessing," ejaculated Horace; "we are rid of that cumbersome affair, and shall now be able to get over the ground, or rather water, as quick as we please. You may, if you like, raise more blisters on those mites of hands. It is wonderful how much strength there is in that tiny wrist of yours, Muriel. I say! the storm-flag is up in that boat, and no mistake about it," he laughed, as we watched it nearing the shore. "My mother is very put out. I can tell it by the way she is holding forth, first to the poor old governor and then to the boatmen—who luckily don't understand."

Indeed, unless the courier were with us, we all laboured under some disadvantage in making ourselves understood by these lake watermen. I was the only one of the party who in the least could speak Italian, and my knowledge was of the slenderest description. I had had a few lessons just before leaving Savona, so that I might pick up a little travelling lingo, but I found it very useless where *patois* was the vogue, as here. I had noticed a good deal of talking among the men of the large boat, as if they were dissatisfied with someone or something, before they left us; but I set it down to some jealousy at their not going on with us for the longer excursion, so did not try to understand even when they appealed to me, which more than once they did. Ah, how often have I regretted the ignorance and laziness combined which prevented my making out what they said! The man we had with us was elderly, and not so intelligent as many of his countrymen. Horace made him know by signs that we wished to go beyond a certain point, still a good way off. He shook his head as if in dissent, and muttered something about "best to keep nearer home," which Horace affirmed was only because he wanted his siesta, or polenta, or something.

I was too intent on managing my oars to notice

what was being said, and we went on for some time and some distance. When I was tired I yielded my post to old Paolo, as I found he was called. He immediately put the boat about, and began to row home with vigour.

"I think he might have asked our leave," said Horace lazily; "but it is getting near tiffin time, and we are still a good hour from home, so I won't balk the old gentleman's fancies any more."

Horace spoke in a very sleepy tone, and by-and-by, leaning his head back against the soft cushions, he fell fast asleep; and I did not disturb him, for in a boat, as in a carriage, I preferred being silent.

When half-an-hour had passed, I noticed that the anxious expression on old Paolo's face, which I had thought his natural cast of countenance, seemed much to increase as he went on rowing almost beyond his strength.

"Is anything wrong?" I hazarded in my bad Italian.

"I fear a storm, signorina," was the answer in a low tone.

A little uneasily, but not in the least guessing the full significance of his words, I looked around me.

True, the clouds were slightly gathering here and there; true, the water was not quite so still as it had been; but I saw nothing to justify great alarm, so did not disturb my companion.

Alas! I knew not the awful danger there was in the sudden squalls on these lakes, and especially to so slight a boat as ours. Yet a vague fear stole over me as we began to rock almost unpleasantly, and little specks of foam flew over us from the now crested waves. Still the old man moved faster and faster.

The nearest point now was Baveno itself, and for that we were making with the utmost speed one pair of arms could take us.

Horace, roused from his sleep, awakened by the noise of the wind and waves as they roared round us; awakened too by the frightened hand I now laid on his arm, opened his eyes and looked round him.

"I dreamed I was at sea, Muriel; and, by heavens, I believe my dream is true!"

He looked with extreme anxiety at the turbulent lake. He was not so ignorant as I, and at once saw our peril.

"Ask that old man how long it will take us to get to land," he said quickly.

I did so, and received the answer

"Only ten minutes, signorina, if it were smooth water; but in this tempest it is frightful. May the saints have mercy on my soul!" and he took one half second from his work to cross himself.

"I am sure there is no fear, Horace," I said, my voice quavering despite myself; "in a quarter of an hour at most we shall be safe on land, we are so near. I can see the hotel quite plainly through the spray."

"You do not know, my darling; you do not understand," he said hurriedly. "Anyway, I must give the help of another pair of arms to get us on."

"No, no, Horace!" I exclaimed, "you must not; you know the doctor said any great exertion would be your death; you must not;" and I clung to him in my energy. "Let me row, I will do it with all my force; you said I was so strong."

He laughed, for he was perfectly cool and composed, and there was in his face a force and vigour I had never seen there before.

"Your strength, sweet one, is but a woman's strength at most, and mine, though not what it was, is far greater. I must do all I can to save your precious life, even if I risk a little to do it."

I dared not say more, there was that about him

which forbade opposition. He seized some oars, and we went bounding over the now huge billows with greater impetus than ever. He knew all depended on the next few minutes, that the increasing fury of the elements would soon render rowing itself impossible, and that all must be done to get us out of the whirl which threatened to take the boat in every direction save the right one, which threatened to submerge us beneath the heaving water which was rising—falling all around us. It was an awful scene, the more so from the terrible contrast with the former stillness. Once, as we were at the top of some monster wave, I thought I saw through the spray which almost blinded us, through the mist which enveloped us in its drizzling vapour, many many people far far off watching us from, no doubt, the garden of the hotel; and my heart ached for the wretched father and mother who saw us in this danger. I thought, too, with agony of the dear ones in England, who so little knew how it was with us. Then I looked at Horace, and we smiled at one another as those smile who know they are just doing their best with courage to meet bravely a sad fate. I had my share of the work, for I was striving to bail out the water from the boat, but it became more and more a

hopeless task, though I still persevered. Once I raised my head again to look at Horace, and when I marked his deadly awful pallor, when I marked how every stroke was telling on his weak frame, I burst into sobs, not for myself, but for the harm he was doing himself. So rooted in me was anxiety for his health, that even at this supreme moment I thought, if we were saved, how all this would hurt him, would make him ill again.

The storm was now raging wilder than ever. The men sat almost useless at their posts, with haggard faces of despair. At last all further effort was in vain; all was over, and we could do no more. Horace gave way at once. While he could work, while he could do something to avert the horrible fate before us, his courage was high and he was almost cheerful; but now, in this fearful inaction, hopeless despair seized on him. He came towards me and took me in his arms, crying: "Muriel, I have tried to save you, even for him, but only God can help you now, and if He does not, at least I shall die with you." There was only the one moment for this one sad wail, and then a great confusion seemed around us, our boat was whirled up high in the air, was caught like a child's plaything in the arms of the merciless wind, was dashed

down again; we saw a huge wave coming nearer, nearer, raising its arched crest of foam over us, and then—we were all struggling in its deep abysses, struggling for our lives! Even above the roar of the water I seemed to hear cries and groans and shrieks far away through the awful sound of the surging tempest.

I felt the human arm drawn around me closer, firmer, in convulsive grasp; but it relaxed and fell away. I stretched my hands vainly for help, for something to lay hold of, but there was nothing save the wide waste of water, which with maddening, deafening roar was dragging me down, down, till all, even myself, seemed cast into the very blackness of utter darkness for ever.

Was it for ever? What is it lying here, bruised and shaken and unnerved? It cannot be myself, for I died in that terrible time, which was surely years and years ago, when I called unto God out of the depths. Could He have drawn me out of the very jaws of death? All things are possible to Him, but that could not be, for He does not raise the dead to life now. Surely I remember dying, I remember the sinking into nothingness; and now where am I? for I begin to feel it is I

or someone lying here. I can see nothing, or is it that I dare not look—that I fear what may be around me? When last I looked in the world it was all too horrible. I dare not open my eyes.

I am no longer in the cruel raging waters—that at least I am sure of. It seems now as if warmth were coming back to my frozen body. Warmth?—that surely means life! The dead are never warm; they are always ice-clay cold. But why this utter stillness? It is horrible, this silence coming after that torture of sound. Now I am sinking once more into deep darkness, but this time a sick darkness which, like that in the days of old, could be felt. Terrible visions are before me, but the most terrible of all, poor Horace's pale deathly face, as he slowly falls from me, falls from my clinging grasp, divided by the sea of foaming water, which was as a gulf between us over which we could not pass. Ah, thank God the visions have faded, have taken their terrible forms from me, and it is all clearer now! But how fearful is this anxiety which is taking possession of me! The silence as of the grave is broken now, for voices, earnest weeping voices are sounding in my ears. Do the dead weep? No, their sorrows are too frozen for tears; it must then be the living who are near me. It is surely only

an awful dream from which, by His mercy, I am awakening.

I now felt that tender hands were touching me, and each moment seemed to bring more life to me. At last I could make out what was being said, though the voices still seemed so very far away.

"She will live," said someone, speaking very gravely. "Her lips are getting a tinge of colour, and by-and-by she will open her eyes."

"Thank God, sir! thank God!" said another voice like Ropes' feeble tones. But why should she be there? and why should she cry so? and who was it who was going to live?

I was again nearly losing my consciousness, again falling back into deathlike oblivion, when I felt some cordial in my mouth, and, revived by it, was able to uncloset my eyes.

I was in my own room, and figures were bending over me.

"Then I am not dead!" I whispered. "But did I not die long ago?" and, dazzled by the blinding light, I could look no more.

"Darken the window, the light is too strong for her," said the same voice I had first heard. "Go on rubbing her, and give her this hot drink from time to time. Keep her perfectly warm and

quiet. She will do very well now. I cannot stay another moment, for I am wanted in the other room."

I heard footsteps die away, and then all was utter stillness again; only every moment I felt the stagnant blood course less slowly through my veins, though its tingling was now becoming very painful; but no bodily sensation could equal the torture of seeing, as I again saw, that one dying face looking into mine and falling, falling from me. I longed to ask for news, but I dared not. My tongue clove to the roof of my mouth. I felt I must yet wait a little before I heard what I so unspeakably dreaded to listen to. Then, too, it was all so confused; only two things clear, that Horace and I had seemed to die, and that I was living. The bewilderment increased as I tried to think, and I was again in the midst of the storm. It is all before me once more. A second face comes peering close into mine. It is the face of an old old man, with white hair and distorted features, as he is whirled swiftly by me. What is his name? How stupid not to remember. It is very horrible, but I must remember his name. Francesco—Stefano—Paolo—yes, it used to be Paolo when he was alive! And what is he doing here? Is he also dead? He is looking my way, with fixed

staring eyes and outstretched arms. Ah, now it is Horace once more! Are all dead save me? God in His mercy forbid!

I opened my eyes in wild terror. I saw Ropes and another woman near me.

"Ropes," I cried, clinging to her, "I cannot bear these sights—these horrible faces. I must know all. Are they dead? Am I only saved?" and sobs, tearless sobs, burst from me.

"Dear dear Miss Muriel," said Ropes, taking me in her arms and soothing me with infinite tenderness, "you were all taken out of the water, and you are all alive." But still there was no joy in her tone—only deep sadness and immeasurable grief.

"If all are alive, Ropes, why should you grieve so? Tell me the truth; don't hide it from me."

I was very weak, but my brain was no longer confused. Ropes gave me some more of the restorative, and tried to evade answering me; but I was determined, so she fell into her habit of complete submission as she told me that the old boatman would live, but that "Master Horace, dear Master Horace, was very ill."

Alas! I felt no surprise. I knew the harm his superhuman exertions must have done him. I knew

what that terrible immersion and the half-drowning must cost to that delicate frame.

"How where we saved?" I asked.

"I will try to tell you," said Ropes, "though I can scarcely speak of it, it was so terrible. It was the awfullest sight I ever saw. We were dreadfully anxious as we all stood there on the terrace watching as you came nearer and nearer. Sometimes we could see nothing, and then at the top of some huge wave we fancied you were there, and then it seemed as if you were sucked in away from us forever. But still we did not lose hope while you could go on rowing and came nearer. There were one or two large boats ready to save you if it was possible, and they went as far as they could to meet you. It was awful to see my dear mistress, she seemed quite to lose her wits, ran from one to the other bribing them with thousands of pounds to save her boy; and when she heard someone say it was because of the smallness of the boat the danger was so much greater, I thought she would have died. My dear master held her back, she was trying to throw herself into the lake to meet her son. Miss Muriel, love, I cannot tell you about the last. I cannot. The confusion seemed always increasing; and then we saw the boat bottom

upwards dashing from wave to wave. We gave up hope; but at last the three bodies were brought in. Master Horace first came back to life, but"—and Ropes stopped, fearing that in her excitement she had told me too much, which indeed she had, for I was ill-fitted to bear the recital. Still I was more resolved than ever to know everything. Ropes dared not disobey, so went on.

"But, Miss Muriel, he is very ill; the doctors say he has hurt himself awfully; there are two with him: the Italian doctor, with a big black beard, and an English doctor, who is staying in the hotel, and I hear they can do nothing for him. Ah, it is cruel! only two short hours have passed, and that lake is now perfectly quiet again. It has done all the mischief it can, and now there is not a ripple on it. I shall be glad to get back to Northshire, and be away from this evil, popish, uncanny land. When we have a storm it does not come sneaking on us, but tells us it is coming, so that we can guard against it; but here you are dead before you know it."

"Is he conscious?" I asked, thinking of but the one thing.

"He is, Miss Muriel, love," sobbed poor Ropes; "and just now I slipped away to look at him—God bless him!—and to tell him you were

better, and he smiled so beautiful, though he could not speak.

"Ropes, I must go to him, this moment," I said, striving to rise. "You shall help me to dress, and heap me up with warm things; but I must go to him, it will kill me to stay here."

"Miss Muriel, I daren't; the doctor said you were to be kept quiet."

"What doctor?" I cried impatiently. "What do I care for any doctor? I did him good before. I will do him good again." And then the feeling of my impotency came to me as I wrung my hands, adding: "If it please God, I will. Ah! was he not trying to save my life, and shall I delay going to him?"

Ropes pleaded in vain. With her help, and stifling the groans which every touch to my sore and bruised body would at another time have wrung from me, I dressed as quickly as I could; then, taking some wine to give me strength, to arrest the deadly faintness which seemed always ready to seize on me again, I turned to leave the room. The doctor stood on the threshold, a tall grave-looking man, with intelligent face and eyes.

I feared opposition; but no, he nodded approval. That approval made my heart like lead within me,

and I knew what he meant when he said gently: "That is well. I was just coming to ask if you could manage to get up and go to him: He wants you sorely. I am glad you are ready, though indeed you are little fitted for the exertion——"

"Stop," I said, "give me one moment. Do you mean by coming for me that there is no hope—do you mean the end is very near?"

"My poor young lady! I fear it is so. There are injuries beyond human skill to remedy; he suffers no pain, and is quite conscious. It is only a question of time. I have not dared tell the poor father and mother; but they fear the worst, and when they see I have brought you, they will understand."

He wrapped a thick shawl around me, and gave me the assistance of his strong arm to lead me to the room. "I am sure," he said quietly, just before we entered it—"I am sure you will strive to control yourself, for all their sakes. It will not be for long, and then we will care for you."

I looked piteously at him, but could not speak. We went into the darkened chamber and up to the small bed where Horace lay; and in his face, in those drawn features, in those closed and sunken eyes, I read those awful words, "No hope!"

I had never thought this before regarding him.

When we fought for his life at The Chase, I always felt within me the strong conviction he would recover; but now, as I sank on my knees by the bedside—for in my weakness I could no longer stand—as I laid my cheek against the poor hand lying on the quilt, I knew that all must soon be over.

Mr. Davenel was at the other end of the room, his gray head bowed down, his hands hiding his face, the whole attitude indescribably sad and pathetic.

The mother stood near me, an unnatural calm on her ashy face, but a world of agony in her beautiful eyes. She said, in low hoarse tones, when she saw me: "Muriel, I know what it means, the seeing you here; you are barely alive yourself, but still you are come to see him once more. You would not have been allowed to come, if he had not been near death. I know all now."

And then a spasm passed over her face which was terrible to see; but soon each feature returned to its former rigidity.

Poor mother! poor broken-hearted woman! what was our grief to hers? I touched her gently on the arm, and prayed her to kneel beside me—to help me, I said. It was so awful to see that motionless

form standing there, frozen into despair; it was not so, she should wait for what was coming. It seemed as if we would be stronger if we were on our knees in submission to God's will. She obeyed, and let me even lean against her; still the face never altered, the bitter hopelessness never left it.

All this while the dying man had lain there apparently noticing nothing that passed around him; but now he opened his eyes, and a faint smile hovered over his lips as he looked on us two kneeling there. He moved his hand feebly till it rested on ours, and strove to speak; but it was with difficulty we could make out the words, so feebly were they uttered, with long pauses between:

"We have come back from the other world, Muriel, you and I, but I am only here for a short while. I am glad though to see your dear faces once more."

Then he turned to the English doctor who was bending over him with grave solicitude, and who now said:

"You had better not speak, Captain Davenel, for each word exhausts your feeble strength."

Again he smiled as he whispered in reply:

"My talking can only make a few hours' difference

at most, doctor. My brain is quite clear, and I must speak to those dear ones whom I am so soon leaving."

I cannot describe the calm dignity of his words and manner; the childish petulance and irritability, which used so to chafe me, was gone, and in its place was the brave earnestness of the man, who was meeting with heroic fortitude the fate which was inevitable.

A groan broke from the poor mother when she felt he too realized the truth. He looked sorrowfully at her and at his father, who on hearing his voice had drawn nearer.

"I wish I had been a better son," he murmured sadly; "I might, I ought to have been so different, and yet I have loved you both more than I have shown."

Then he seemed to wander, talking of The Chase, and his sister Mary, as if they were children once more. But presently he roused himself, and exclaimed with some of his old energy:

"I am forgetting there is so little time, and I must see Muriel alone, quite alone. I will not send you away for long, mother, and when you return you shall not leave me again. You do not mind, do you?"

Ah, how unlike him, this pleading, this asking for a favour! There was no thought of gainsaying him. The doctor told me to give him some restorative from time to time, and said they would all remain quite near. We were then left together.

"Muriel," said the faint voice, which sounded so far away, almost as if he were already in that other world to which he was so fast hastening—"Muriel, come nearer—put your arm there, let me lean on you. Look me in the face while I speak. I must see in your dear eyes what you feel—whether you can forgive me."

"I have nothing to forgive," I answered. "You have been so good to me—I cannot bear to lose you. I wish I had died instead."

"My one comfort is that you are spared," he said. Then with an effort proceeded: "I wish to tell you the truth at last. I have known for long that you and Faulkner loved each other. I knew it when he left The Chase—when I saw his face and yours. I hid my knowledge of it, because I could not bear to lose you. My love for you is great, but has been selfish—entirely selfish. I would not let you confide in me that day, because I dared not let you see I knew all, Muriel. I was madly jealous of him—of everyone who came between me and you. You were

so true that I could not help trusting you; but now, when death is so near, I can see things as I never saw them before. If we had married I could not have made you happy. I should not have won your love, for I should always have been jealous, always exacting, unreasonable. It is all so clear now. It all became clear to me when I tried just now to save your life. God came to me at the last. I said to Him as I took that oar, and as I smiled at you: 'Let me save her life, even if it cost mine. Let me save her life for him.' Tell Faulkner this, will you? Tell him I am not jealous now. Love, since I knew you I have tried to be a better man, but it was all failure because I could not give you up—because I did not care how miserable you two were, so that I might get you. But that one moment in the boat when I forgot myself, has—has brought me nearer God than—I ever——" Here he stopped; the flush which the painful effort of speech cost him faded from his ashy cheek. In great alarm I made him swallow a little of the cordial. Alas! only a few drops passed his lips; but they served to revive him. "Do you forgive me, forgive the wretchedness I have made you feel? It will soon be over now, and you will be happy."

"Oh, not happy," I sobbed. "I cannot think

of anyone but you now—you who have saved me, you whom I love in your unselfishness as I could never love you before.”

“God bless you for those sweet words,” he said, and almost a joyful ring came into his voice; “it does not seem so hard now to leave you all. Am I selfish to wish you should think of me even when you are happy, as you will be, as you deserve to be one day? You will try to keep a tender memory of me?” I could not speak, but stooped and kissed him for answer. “Now there is little more to trouble save my faults, such grievous faults, Muriel;” and a look came into his face most sad to see; “the years I have wasted—love. I wish a little time had been given me to be better in——”

Something stronger than myself came into me now. I forgot all save him and our loving Saviour, as, falteringly, feebly, I spoke comfort to him—the only comfort we can give to the dying with absolute assurance that we may give it to them.

He listened almost greedily to the words as they fell from my lips. Ah would that some one fitter than I had been there just then! but God knows best always, and no better help was near.

At last he said: “His infinite mercy! Thank you for those words. His infinite mercy.” Another

pause ensued, and then he said quickly: "Call them here, Muriel; call them——"

I flew to the door; I fetched them in; and, as we stood and knelt near him, we knew the end was very near. He spoke a few words to his father and mother; he sent messages to those at home; then, glancing towards me, he said:

"Be always good to Muriel, mother; she has done so much for me, and she will comfort you so. I leave her to you. By-and-by, help her to be happy."

I do not know whether Mrs. Davenel understood his meaning, but she said:

"I shall always love her, Horace, for your sake and her own." Then an irrepressible wail broke from the mother's heart. "My son, you are leaving me; I want a word of love too."

He beckoned her to stoop to him, for he could only whisper now. The few words he breathed into her ears, the solemn loving words, brought gladness for one brief moment to her face. Then she fell on her knees, and tears at last came to her. He stroked the gray hair fondly.

"Poor mother!" he whispered once or twice as the sobs of the old woman made themselves heard.

Then, still thinking of her, and at last realizing her great love, he looked at me and said, "Muriel."

I understood at once, and answered his thought: "I will be as a daughter to her always."

Again that beautiful smile came like a glory over the dear face.

"Pray for me." This he said hurriedly, as he felt the end so near. "Pray for me, father." There was a pause, and through the room came the accents of his father's voice, clear, firm, unfaltering as he prayed for his dying son; and before the beautiful words were ended, the tired head had sunk back on the pillow, the weary was at rest, the soul had returned to its God.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE RETURN TO THE CHASE.

I SUPPOSE I must have fainted, for I remember nothing more.

Hours and hours afterwards I roused from my stupor to find myself in bed, and Mrs. Davenel watching near me. For a few days I was very ill; and her one only comfort seemed to be to do what she could for me.

"She was to have been his wife, and he loved her," was her answer, when they entreated her to rest more. Once I spoke to the doctor, begging him to make her leave me, for I could not bear that she should tire herself.

"My dear Miss Sterling," he answered, "you are the best medicine in the world for her. She seems to be giving you some of the love I hear

she spent on him. It is her one comfort to fulfil his last wish, that she should be good to you."

After that I let her do as much as she liked for me."

Oh! the weary sad days which followed! As soon as I was fit to travel we prepared for the journey home; we—the broken-hearted parents and I. The poor body had preceded us, to be laid not in the mausoleum where rested so many of his ancestors, but in the old churchyard near The Chase. It had been his wish, often expressed, to be buried there, and his father and mother seemed to live now only to do as he desired in all things.

The funeral was to be the day after we returned, and we were hastening back for it. Could there be a sadder home-return? My heart breaks when I think of it.

I can see ourselves on that depressing home-journey—I, stretched on cushions, for I was very weak, and opposite me Mr. and Mrs. Davenel sitting still and motionless for hours and hours, their heads bent, noticing little around them, and not caring to speak.

In my mind was so vivid the remembrance of that journey, so full of hope and cheeriness, which only a few months before had taken us to our Savona

villa. Ah, what a terrible contrast was this! Already I missed my life's work most painfully. I was so accustomed to think constantly of him, to study his comforts, to feel anxious for his health, that the no longer doing so made a blank that was almost insupportable; and if it were so to me, what was it not to his mother?

She never roused from her apathy save when she could do some little thing for me; and I often pretended I wanted things just to bring her back to us. The old imperiousness seemed to have left her; could it be that it was gone for ever? She gave no orders, expressed no wish, referred people to Mr. Davenel if anything was asked of her, and when, with tears in his eyes, the old man would implore her to say what she would like, she would answer gently:

"I wish nothing; I would rather you and Muriel settled everything." And then she would again become absorbed in her own sad thoughts.

It was a still beautiful evening, towards the end of June, when we once more drove through the avenue leading up to The Chase. Never had the old place looked more exquisite than it did just then. The soft light of a summer sunset fell in golden streaks on the tender grass; scarce a leaf stirred on the beautiful elms, beneath which, on the morrow,

was to pass the funeral procession which should accompany the heir to his last home in this world.

How this aspect of joy and peace and content which pervaded the whole landscape jarred on us as we drove along! How much heavier it made our burden of grief! We stopped at a side entrance, for there was one lying in the grand old hall who would only tarry for a short while longer within its shelter; but while that still form was there, it would not do, by unseemly noise, to disturb the solemn quiet which reigned around it.

Kitty and Anastasia stood awaiting us in their deep black robes, their faces pale, their eyes full of tears, as they and we almost shrank from the meeting, which nevertheless must be gone through. But when Anastasia noticed Mrs. Davenel's bent figure and tottering step, noticed that the former stateliness seemed gone, the awe with which her mother usually inspired her disappeared, and the daughter took her rightful place. With one cry of, "Mother, dear mother!" she went towards her and then drew back, fearing that she should offend. But no, the mother now clung to her only remaining child, and was led by her gently and lovingly to her own room.

I was helped from the carriage, and Kitty's

loving caresses were the first things which, since that fatal day, seemed to bring warmth back to my frozen heart. It was now that I saw her father standing somewhat apart, as if he could not yet meet us.

His face was very sad ; it was full of such infinite pity for us all, and of his own grief also, for he had loved poor Horace very truly always. I saw all this in him, as I held out my hand with a calmness which surprised even me. The shadow of death was over us all, and within its awful precincts no thought, save of the loved one who had entered into rest, could come into our hearts.

"She is much changed, Faulkner ; we all are," said the poor father ; "but of course she is still terribly weak, and the long journey has tired her. We must get her to her room as soon as we can."

They took me, but not to the old rooms. How thankful I was for that. I had so dreaded the renewal of old associations, now so fraught with pain. The weird gloom of the schoolroom crag, which in happier times had enchained and fascinated my vivid imagination, would have tried me now ; also the sight of sea or lake roused in me a horror which it took all my strength to hide from

others, and which only time and restored health could overcome.

Our new quarters, for Kitty was put near me, were in the sunniest, brightest part of the house, and looked over the lovely lawns and gardens. I guessed at once who had thought of this for me. I knew well his intuitive tact, his power of reading into other people's feelings and wishes as no one else could do, and I thanked him for sparing me so much extra pain; and then I went back to the memory of him for whom I mourned so faithfully.

That night only feverish half-waking dreams came to me, dreams in which sleep was, as it often is, a cruel parody of real life, for it brought to me Horace alive, well, full of brightness and vitality, with seemingly no possibility of death or decay about him. He was standing in the old hall, and I was laughing with him at some pleasant jest, when I turned, and saw not far off a coffin with a heavy velvet pall. He saw it too, and once in his merriment he paused, and pointing to it, said: "Who is lying there, Muriel? It looks so gloomy there. I will have it taken away to-morrow. I will go with it myself."

And then I awoke, and a great fear came over me, so that I did not wish to sleep again. I felt I must

rise and go down to the hall—I wished to be near him once more—I wished to exorcise if I could, this terror from my mind by meeting it face to face. So I slowly dressed myself, and wrapping a warm cloak round me—for I was cold, though the summer night was not so—I stole through the gallery to the top of the great stairs. The lights were burning down there, in the centre of the hall, just as I had seen them in my dream; and covered with beautiful flowers, so abundant that their exquisite scent came to me where I stood, was the coffin. It was not so terrible as I had seen it in my sleep, and the large white cross which rested on it quieted and stilled the horror within, leading my thoughts away from the sad present up to the blessed rest which was, I trusted, granted to him whose poor body lay within that lovely shrine.

I almost started as I now perceived a dark figure kneeling near the heavy folds of the pall. It was the poor mother, who perhaps had spent there many hours of that sad night in which her son would be for the last time in his old home.

At first I thought I would turn away, and then I remembered my last promise to Horace, that I would be as a daughter to her; so I went timidly down the stairs and knelt beside her. Only then

did she notice my approach, only then did she turn and look at me.

"My child," she said, "you should not be here, you are not strong enough."

"I wished it," I said weeping—her gentleness broke my heart. "I wished to be near him once more; I wished to pray here. But when I saw you, I thought I would go away, till I remembered how he would wish us to mourn together."

She stooped and kissed me.

"The tie between us, Muriel, will never be broken, though joy may yet come into your young life, though joy can never again come to me." Then, with an exceeding bitter cry the bereaved mother stretched her hands to where he lay, and moaned: "My son, my son, I never loved but you, and now you are gone from me for ever!"

"Not for ever, dear dear Mrs. Davenel!" I cried; "it will only be a very little while, and you will see him 'for ever.' Think of that 'for ever,' the only real 'for ever,' and, in that blessed hope, try to rest, try to be comforted even in the present. Think too, how we all love you, think how you can comfort his poor father, who suffers so. There is so much left for you to do—so much that he who has gone from us would wish you to do. And in doing all this the

time will pass so quickly, till you go to him who is waiting for you."

She was very good, for she let me say this and much more to her, and then she in her turn spoke. Somehow, in that still awful hour, when she and I were alone, the old terrible coldness, the icy reserve, the hard pride, yielded to tender womanly feelings. She spoke naturally, humanly of her bitter grief; she acknowledged she had let her love be idolatry; she saw the mistake of her whole life; she saw how even her boy would have loved her more if her own love had been unselfish.

She was almost merciless in her judgment of herself; and oh! how I pitied her, when in heart-broken accents she regretted the foolish fears which had caused her to leave the smaller boat to us. In vain I assured her that it might have made no difference, that I was sure it had not; I could not comfort her there. The mother's heart would reproach itself so long as she lived for this, and none could save her the sharp pang. Who has not known the torturing thought, when some dear one has gone, that perhaps if this or that had been different, perhaps if some little thing, which one had done in pure thoughtlessness, had not been done, our beloved might still have been with us? God only can comfort

the mourner's heart when these bitter memories come, and the sting of them can never quite leave us while we live. To Mrs. Davenel this was a pain which never left her, and only as years passed on, and she drew nearer and nearer in loving submission to her God, was she able to still her self-reproach by laying it before Him, who alone can really take such pain away. I strove in that sad night to show her how I felt with her, how I cared for her. I was drawn to her almost as if she had been my own mother.

I suppose much time had passed without our knowing it, for it was now broad daylight, and we heard the joyous song of the birds without, as they chanted their morning orisons.

I now perceived Mr. Davenel coming towards us. I rose and signed to him to take my place, and as I left them, I saw his wife cling to him, as I had never seen her do before. I was very thankful for this, I thought it was like God's unfailing goodness, that out of this bitter sorrow should spring this one great blessing, that poor Mrs. Davenel should no longer repulse her husband's love.

I went to my own room, and there I stayed for some days, for I was too ill to leave it. Mrs. Davenel spent much of her time with me; her one comfort seemed to be to sit silently near me, except when I

would encourage her to speak of her son. I had to use tact in this; sometimes it was a great consolation to her to do so, at others it did her harm. She was striving hard now to be more gentle to her husband and daughter; it seemed as if, in her newborn humility, she were wishful to make up to them for her former harshness and neglect.

She was becoming a new woman. Does this seem very unnatural? To some it will—to some who, in their cynical belief in the predominance of evil over good, would doubt the holy power of God's loving chastisements over our nature. But to those who know Him as He really is, it will not seem impossible. Certainly, from the day of her son's death, or rather, from the night when she passed that long vigil on her knees by his coffin, Katherine Davenel was a changed woman. Never very cheerful, never very lively perhaps, our original natures may be modified in many respects, but the salient points must remain the same; but she was more gentle, more unselfish, more kindly. I have described her character feebly if I have not shown her to be very "thorough." And now this one steadfast quality in her was of great benefit to her. She wished much to be truly religious, and at once grasped that she could only be so by bringing her

fear, and still more her growing love, of God, into the smallest action of her daily life. At first we could not realize it, and indeed, as is often the case in our spiritual nature, the change came gradually. Day by day she gave up more of her own will, day by day she strove more to overcome self. This alteration in her drew us all very closely to her, and we felt as if we could not do enough for her, whom now we so revered in her great sorrow, and her great patience.

All this time I had seen very little of Mr. Stewart. I heard he was a real help to them all in this time of trouble. I also knew that the day for his going to Canada was fast approaching.

I was glad that my remaining invalidism kept me so much to my own room. I did not shrink from meeting him, it was impossible for me to do that; but it was equally impossible to forget what had been between us, and I felt that the deep and sincere grief which I suffered for the one who was gone should alone absorb me now, so it was best I should not see much of Mr. Stewart. I think he thought this also. Had I been, as a few days more must have made me, the widow, and not merely the betrothed of poor Horace, he could not have approached me with more reserve, though

always with sympathy, than he did on the few occasions we were in each other's society. Just now I was touched to the very quick, and was bound still more closely in gratitude to the memory of him who had died to save me. A sum of money, some few thousands, had been left to him shortly before we had gone abroad. It had scarcely been mentioned or thought of; certainly I had not heard of it. What were a few thousands more or less to one, who would one day be so enormously rich? With tender thoughtfulness he had bequeathed this only money, which was really his, to me, "so that," as the will went on touchingly to say, "so that, if he should not live to marry me, he might have the happiness of knowing that I should have no further need ever again to work for my bread." So now I was independent; not rich, but there was enough for myself, enough to throw many more comforts into my sweet mother's life, enough to smooth Lottie's course of true love, so that it might run counter to, and falsify the proverb.

I was very grateful for this—those who have ever known the sharp pinch of poverty will know how grateful!—but surely every generous heart will also

understand how this tender thought for me increased the pain which at times hurt me so sorely, the pain which I felt because I had not been able to love him more. Indeed, I could not have taken the money if my grief for him had been one whit less true and deep than it was.

Little Kitty was much with me, for she was again without a governess. Mrs. Field had shortly before our return been summoned to a brother's house to take charge of his recently orphan children. It was a claim of duty she could not neglect, and she had left with much regret a situation which was so exceptionally agreeable. When I heard of efforts being made to provide a substitute, I began thinking: The Davenels had grown so to love me and I to love them, that I was sure much of my future would be spent with them. Why could I not resume my former happy work of teaching the child I loved so dearly—at any rate for the next two or three years, till she had grown beyond my limited attainments? She might be with me now at The Chase, and now at Durnford, if it was so approved of. I spoke of this to Mr. and Mrs. Davenel. At first they were against my undertaking the fatigue of teaching; but when they saw how I wished it, when I told them I longed for work,

that my life would be less sad if I had it, they yielded, only begging that I would mostly have the child at The Chase.

"You shall go to Durnford when you wish it, and your mother and sister must often come here; but let this be your home always, Muriel, as it would have been if——" and then the old man turned away, for further speech was impossible, while Mrs. Davenel pleaded: "Muriel, I cannot do without you, now."

There was only Mr. Stewart's consent to be obtained, so it was on nearly his last day, when he chanced to be alone with me for one minute, that I asked him if he were willing I should still have his child with me, till I had taught her all I knew.

He looked at me with the first gladness I had seen on his face since our trouble. "It is almost the dearest wish of my heart. I was longing to ask it. God bless you for the thought," he said softly, and then some one came in and there was no need for further speech.

Soon after that he came to bid me farewell. I knew how sorely he would be missed—how helpless we should all feel without him, but I could not tell him so; a reserve, a not unnatural reserve, had arisen between us, and yet I think we both suffered

under it. Still I would not have had it otherwise, at least not then.

For one moment, as he held my hand firmly in his, for one brief moment the reserve disappeared from his face as his eyes met mine, and he said: "Kitty will let me know how you are. I hope to hear that your are stronger, that your great grief is comforted, that you are happier. I trust my child fully to you, and trusting her is trusting myself also, for she is my all."

I replied, "I will try to be worthy of your trust," and then my eyes fell, for I could not meet his any longer. And then he went away.

I dared not think of those last words of his, I put them into the background of my thoughts, as I returned to my old life's work, feeling it was a work very precious to me, and feeling very thankful it was again mine.

The next few months passed on in still monotony. One anxiety began to haunt us, and that was Kitty's delicate health. Whether she pined for the dead uncle or for the absent father, or whether she had outgrown her strength and needed change, certainly she was very far from well. She was now of great importance, poor child, for she was the heiress to all the Davenel wealth; but it was the intense love we

all felt for the one sunbeam in our home, which made us fidget so about her.

Mrs. Davenel was especially unhappy. She, who used to pooh-pooh all delicacy of health as affectation, had now run into the opposite extreme, and it seemed as if her old worrying nature must give itself this one outlet for its restlessness. Once she said, when merely a bad cold caused Mr. Davenel to keep his room :

“Muriel, am I to lose more out of my life? If God wills it, it must be so, but I think it will kill me.”

Poor Mrs. Davenel! in entire quietness and confidence her strength would perhaps never show itself; but oh! how much more lovable she was now in her anxiety than in her former hardness!

The only visitors who came to The Chase that sad autumn were my mother and Lady Garth, who, in their true unobtrusive sympathy, were most welcome guests. I forget; besides these two came child friends for Kitty. They had never before been invited for her, but we wished much that her young life should be cheered and brightened, and lifted out of the gloom which hung over the sorrowing household.

Still, when I look back on those months, though

here was much sadness, there was much peace. The shadow of bereavement was over us, and in Mrs. Davenel's presence there was a still gravity such as one feels in the presence of one who has been sorely smitten and afflicted. But in the midst of all the natural grief and depression, we could not but feel there was peace such as had never before been in that hitherto disunited home.

As December drew near Kitty's strength flagged more and more. I had always urged she wanted change, that she ought to go inland, away from the sea for a while—and at last they all saw it. At first there was a proposal to move the family *en masse*, but Mr. and Mrs. Davenel so evidently shrank from the idea, that I pleaded with them to let the child go with me to Durnford. There was no better, no purer, air in England than that which blew over our common and through the pine-woods near it. Also the entire change of scene and people would do the child good.

The plan was agreed to, with evident relief at so easy a solution of the difficulty being found. Mr. Stewart was written to, and gave a most willing assent; so a week before Christmas I took my beloved charge home.

I was very sorry to leave the sad trio at The

Chase. I felt it almost selfish to do so. But Lady Garth said the missing us would do them all infinite good.

"It will force Anastasia more and more to take her rightful place in the household, Muriel. Mrs. Davenel is too inclined to lean on your strong nature. Now she will turn to her husband and daughter, and will draw more closely to them."

I thought it very probable she would prove right; and making Lady Garth promise she would go still more frequently to cheer and help them, I gave myself up to all the pleasure of anticipation.

I can scarcely say what those three months at Durnford did for us. They certainly brought new life to Kitty. The bright cosiness of my cottage home was like a revelation to the child, whose surroundings had hitherto been of a gloomy and stately description.

The change that was wrought in her was wonderful. I took back with me to The Chase a healthy rosy little girl, not half so imaginative or so sensitive, perhaps a shade more commonplace, but infinitely more satisfactory in a rational health point of view.

And what did this revisiting of my beloved home do for me? Did it bring new life to me also? I know this much—it brought to me once more the

feeling that happiness might yet be possible to me. Not that I could ever again return to be the careless thoughtless girl, who used to pace her "out-door parlour" on the old Common with such frank joyousness, indulging in such bright day-dreams. But I no longer felt, as I had grown to do at The Chase, as if I *ought* not to be happy again—as if all life save the calm peaceful routine of duty were closed to me.

I did not care to join in any of the small gaieties which at that season of the year brightened our quiet village; my deep mourning and my own feelings prevented my even wishing to do so. But I felt daily, hourly, happier under the influence of my mother's and Lottie's cheerfulness. Lottie's engagement was now acknowledged publicly, and in a year's time she would be married: so it was not surprising if she were very content.

Though I did not go out into society, I enjoyed much the sociable comings-in-and-out, and cosy talks over the fireside, which are so the custom in friendly neighbourly places like Durnford. I was also surprised to find how much better I liked Lady Sarah Vernon than I used. I don't suppose she had altered, so I fancy the change must have been in me. I had seen more of the world in the last year and a half

than in all my preceding life, and could appreciate her powers of originality better than I used. She averred that I was bodily the same small Muriel, but that I had grown mentally, at any rate, and so was much more agreeable than formerly.

I had many solitary rambles through my beloved haunts on the Common, in which I used to think deeply, and where, as was natural, I lived in the past—lived over even that one portion of it which still made me quiver with intensity of feeling—viz. the interviews with Mr. Stewart, which had so strongly coloured my whole life, which would colour it to the end.

While I was at The Chase, sorrow for the dead and deep gratitude for his love and generosity, had made me resolutely shut out the thoughts of anyone save him; but now by degrees came the inestimable relief that it was no longer wrong for me once more to think of Mr. Stewart.

But even now I would not let myself look into the future. I often said to myself that those months in which Mr. Stewart had looked upon me as betrothed to another, as so soon to be bound to that other by the most sacred of all vows, had most probably caused him to think of me very differently; that his strong will and his intense sense of honour had

enabled him to change from the love he felt for me to the quiet affection which was all that he ought to give to poor Horace's wife, and that nothing was more likely than that this change should be lasting in him.

I had no reason to suppose that any warmer feeling than friendship existed for me now. Kindly messages, short friendly notes, at rare intervals, which as a matter of course passed between us about his child, spoke of nothing more than friendship.

I often remembered Horace's message to him, that beautiful unselfishness of his last moments, and thought I might never need to tell Mr. Stewart that the dying man had exerted his last feeble strength to save me for him, and had wished him to know this.

This sacred message, which I knew would touch Mr. Stewart's generous nature to the quick, which was locked up in my own breast, which I could not even tell my own mother—would it ever pass my lips, I wondered?

And then I would again banish alike wonder and speculation, and would give myself up to the content of the present.

Ay, that was what I felt now—content. The struggle between right and wrong was over; my very soul was at rest, for I knew that, whatever came

into the future, still my own real self could remain the same—there need be no cruel conflict within me. I might give myself up to my daily work, might think tenderly of the past, might serve my dear ones in the present; and for the future—well, I would leave it with Him who knew all things, and to Whom I could trust all things.

I wonder if this calm was natural, this quiet waiting for what was or was not to come to me? I know not, but it was exactly what I felt; and when one thinks of the storm of doubt, and struggle, and passion, in which for so many months my whole nature had been overwhelmed, is it surprising that mere rest was, for the present at least, happiness?

So at the end of our three months the child and I returned to my other home, so refreshed and strengthened that we in our turn did good to those who had missed us.

CHAPTER IX.

ANASTASIA.

I now let myself be more cheerful before Mrs. Davenel. I had been so afraid before I went to Durnford lest she should think me without feeling, if I tried to be happy; but now that so much time had passed I felt it was right to endeavour to rouse those around me from their gloom. I was much helped in my efforts by an event, which made a great change in the life of one of the inmates of The Chase.

As Lady Garth had foretold, our absence had given Anastasia more of her rightful importance in the household; and just as it had been when we were in France, she was ever so much the better, mentally and bodily, for feeling herself of use in the world.

She developed a spirit of talking; not a very

wise one, perhaps, but with much of her father's homely cheerfulness in it, which made her seem quite different, and which added much to the pleasantness of our home circle.

One day, early in August, she came in to lunch with a bright pretty colour in her cheeks, and though she seemed full of something, that something did not evaporate in words, as was her usual wont when she returned from her ministrations among the poor, by whom she was much beloved, sometimes I fear because her kindly gentle nature was so easily "taken in."

"Who was that, Anastasia," asked Mr. Davenel, looking up from his plate after an unusual interval of silence; "who was that whom you were talking to at Widow Jones' gate, as I rode through the village just now? I thought the face and figure were familiar to me, but I could not tack a name to them. You were so busy conversing that you never noticed me, though I hailed you from afar."

Anastasia's pretty colour now became a flag of distress, as she answered nervously, with a shy glance at her mother, in which there was more than a ghost of her former awe. "I was talking to an

old friend we have not met for years, papa. You may remember his name—Dr. Fearon ? ”

Mrs. Davenel started, and looked at Anastasia, who still more nervously proceeded with her story :

“Dr. Fearon says he will call here this afternoon. He is at Compton Castle ; he was telegraphed for to see that grandchild of the Garths who has been so ill. He is still staying on there for a holiday, and to-day rode over to see Mr. Loscombe and other friends,” continued Anastasia, who was now beetroot colour.

I guessed all at once, and was sure this must be the old lover, who coming back to these parts by that misnamed “chance”—which so often brings the unexpected into our lives—had resolved perhaps to try to get a glimpse of his former flame.

“Oh,” said Mr. Davenel, evidently only half remembering, “I believe it is years and years since he was Loscombe’s partner, and since then he has become famous in London. I used to like him, he was such a thorough gentleman, and——” Here, full recollection flashing on him, Mr. Davenel in his turn looked confusedly at his wife.

Those frightened glances in her direction seemed to bring back the painful state of things which used

to pervade The Chase, but it was only for a moment. Mrs. Davenel met her husband's and daughter's eyes with her new-born gentleness as she said quietly :

"It is very long certainly, since we saw Dr. Fearon, yet I remember all about him. I will make a point of being in, this afternoon. I shall rather like to meet him again."

Anastasia could not become redder, but she now bent over her plate to hide the tears which rushed to her eyes, and from that moment the last fear, the last dread of her mother left her tender heart for ever.

Mrs. Davenel did stay in that afternoon, and so did Anastasia curiously enough, for she generally did not affect afternoon callers. And somehow, Dr. Fearon found he could prolong his holiday a few days longer, as London was now so empty ; so staying at Compton Castle, where he was a welcome guest, and where Lady Garth, guessing the state of affairs, gave him *carte blanche* to be as much as he pleased at The Chase, he renewed his old intimacy with Anastasia.

Mr. Davenel was happy for the first time since Horace's death : he had never been allowed to enjoy

a courtship before—not even his own, I fancy—but now, under Mrs. Davenel's very nose, love-making—though need I say it, of the most decorous description possible—was gravely sanctioned by her, and delighted in by him.

He would, I truly believe, have been glad to have been in at “the death,” I mean “proposal,” if he could. To have been witness to the inevitable billing and cooing, which are supposed to attend such sentimental performances, would have afforded him the intensest satisfaction. Where the “Will you have me?” really took place I never heard, but I know one day Anastasia, very tearful and decidedly incoherent from happiness, emerged from her mother's room, and seizing me in warm embrace informed me that full consent was given, and that it was all so wonderful that she did not, and never could, believe that it was true.

But in time she did believe it, and wore her new honours quite prettily. To me it is very touching when happiness, young happiness, comes to those who, no longer youthful, have packed away joy and gladness as things which will never come to them again.

We all liked Dr. Fearon very much. He was a

quiet, grave, somewhat preoccupied man, and seemed truly fond of his betrothed. As was natural, he was all and everything to her, perhaps more than she could ever be to him, for he was a great enthusiast in his profession, and after his love disappointment it had amply filled up his life till propinquity brought a revival of the old affection, and made him desire once more to indulge in it.

Anastasia would grumble to me sometimes, saying that "what with his patients, and lectures, and science, she should see so little of him after marriage," and when I told her "that that would be far better than seeing too much of him," I believe she thought me very unfeeling.

They had a very short engagement, only two months; neither of them were as young as they had been, and there was no need for delay. There were also no money difficulties to contend with, Anastasia's dowry and his profession providing an ample income for them.

They were a very happy pair. He was much from home, as his wife had foreboded he would be, but he took an ever-increasing pleasure in the restful intervals he could snatch from his intellectual labours, to spend with one whose unfailing good-temper and

gentle sweetness soothed and refreshed him, giving him the repose which, perhaps, a far cleverer woman, of a more restless, excitable temperament, could not have done.

One so often sees clever men choose for their wives women who are the very reverse, and one can understand the rest they think they will find in some gentle housewifely nature; but they do not know till too late how often dulness is allied to the obstinacy and narrowmindedness which are sure in time to make the home the reverse of happy.

Anastasia was, however, very exceptional to the ordinary unclever woman in her sweet submissive nature, and in her loving appreciation, and sympathy even with what she could not understand. She possessed, too, that rarest and most precious gift with which our too loquacious sex can be endowed, for she knew how and when to be silent. So Dr. Fearon might be congratulated on having drawn a very fair prize in the matrimonial lottery.

We missed the bride very much, but it was becoming more and more easy to me to amuse this household into which my life had been so strangely thrown; for a well-spring of peace and

hope was rising within me, which could not fail to have a cheering influence on others.

The notes, or rather letters, between Mr. Stewart and me were becoming more frequent. They were only friendly epistles of course; but while those to his little girl were graphic amusing descriptions of his life in Canada, and were eagerly looked for and enjoyed by us all, his letters to me were gradually becoming such as I preferred keeping to myself, for they were revelations of his inner self, given with the absolute certainty that I would understand him, and that he was speaking to only another self as it were.

Ah! what pleasure it gave me to reply to him! Mere duty letters had always been irksome to me, and in them I only presented a stiff formal aspect of myself to my luckless correspondents, while pen and fingers alike halted and flagged as I unwillingly indited them. But oh, the difference when I would sit down to send my very own thoughts and feelings to my absent friend! I used to fix certain hours and days for this great enjoyment; and I was absolutely sure that my letters were very welcome, for he often told me how he looked forward to them. It was this correspondence which so brightened and enlivened

my whole life, and I watched the precious case which contained his epistles, becoming more and more closely stuffed, with almost miserly pleasure at the accumulation.

Christmas came round again. It was, this winter, a mild warm yule-time, which is said to make a fat kirkyard, but which is nevertheless far more acceptable to our poorer brothers and sisters, than is the bitter cold of frost and snow. Immediately after it Kitty and I were to go to Durnford, for Lottie's marriage was to be early in January, and I, of course, wished to be at it; also to stay awhile with mother, and then, as Mrs. Davenel kindly arranged, to bring her back with me to The Chase for a good long visit.

So it was all settled. But all did not quite turn out as we had arranged it.

Shortly before we went southwards I was a little lazy one morning in getting up. But this was no longer an unpardonable offence in the now more indulgent household, therefore, with no qualms of dread such as I should have felt in my governess-days, I entered the breakfast-room, where I saw Mr. and Mrs. Davenel in deep conference by the fireside.

They at once called me to them, and imparted their trouble to me—which, indeed, was no slight one.

The agent for the whole Davenel property had died suddenly. He was a gentleman who had been in most respects admirably suited for the post, though perhaps he was a little hard and unsympathetic; but he would be much missed, and it would be very difficult to replace him. The management of such vast domains involved much responsibility, and the work was very hard, especially that part of it which consisted in overlooking the large coal and iron mines which contributed so large a share to the Davenel wealth.

Mr. St. John had lived in a pretty little place very near The Chase, and had been a most pleasant neighbour; so in every way his death was a sad loss. I was heartily sorry for Mr. and Mrs. Davenel, the more so as since their son's death they had taken so much less interest in business matters; and they both evidently shrank from the great difficulty of choosing another agent, which now devolved on them.

Breakfast was half over when, after a long silence, Mr. Davenel, looking abstractedly at a

Canadian letter which he had that morning received, suddenly exclaimed: "I wonder if Faulkner could be induced to take the post? He is a man so well fitted for it, and it would be such a relief to give it to one whom we could so thoroughly trust. It would be for his life, and the income is a good one. Besides, who is so fit as Kitty's father to look after her future interests?"

In former days Mr. Davenel would not have dared to originate any idea, but he was more and more expanding under the benign influences which were now around him. Also this was no new idea to him. Ten years previously, before Mr. St. John was appointed agent, Mr. Davenel had longed to offer it to his son-in-law, but awe of his wife, and knowledge of her dislike to Mary's husband, had prevented his doing it. It only now seemed to him like a continuation of the old thought, when the chance sight of Mr. Stewart's writing brought the old wish to him.

Mrs. Davenel at first made no answer. A flush mounted to her pale cheeks as she glanced in my direction, and a look of deep pain came into her face. Presently she said:

"Let us think it over, Edward, I cannot talk

of it just yet." Something in her tone struck him, and no more was said about it. It was holiday time, so when breakfast was over I was able to be alone. When Mr. Davenel first spoke of this plan of his, it seemed as if an ecstasy of delight took hold of me. To have Mr. Stewart home again, to bring him from that dreary exile, of which, in only his last letter, he had said "that the loneliness was hard to be borne, but that he must not be selfish, must not, at least for the present, try to bring into his life that solace which others needed so much too."

I would not too closely analyze those words, but they had filled me with mingled pain and pleasure, and had made my answer to them warmer perhaps than I had ever let it be before, in my deep sympathy with his solitary life. And now all this might be ended! he might be with us again, if only——. And then I saw Mrs. Davenel's face, heard her sad and measured words, and guessed the thoughts which had come into her heart.

She could not know how things were between Mr. Stewart and me. How could she, when even I did not? But she was the only one in that house who knew what had been, and was it not natural

she should remember that bringing him to England, putting in his hands the comfortable income, the settled home, might enable him to do what he so wished then ; what, for aught she knew, he might so wish still ?

To the old Mrs. Davenel, this thing would be impossible to do ; even to the new, the changed Mrs. Davenel, it would be a thing hard to do. She clung to her son's memory with all the tenacity of her strong nature. Her grief for him, her longing to meet him again, to show him how she had striven to do as he wished her to do, were the powerful motives which, joined to her love of God, impelled her love for us, and influenced all her good and kind actions.

She clung to me, because she saw how truly I had mourned for him ; and it would be very hard to see me forget him—to see me, perhaps, quite happy with the man whom I had preferred to him. Yes, it would be very hard for her to do this thing—so hard, that if she could not bring herself to be so generous, I must not blame her even in my heart ; but poor nature will out. I did so wish to see him again. I had waited so long. Every letter had done its work in binding me so closely

to him; and now my heart's desire seemed so near, if only—if only——. I tried to think that if Mrs. Davenel did not consent to this it might be for the best, for could I bear his return if I found he wished no more between us than the “happy friendship,” as he used to call it?

And then I felt I must not think only of self, for I knew that to return home would be like life to him—that to lead an English country life would just suit him; that to be near his Kitty and others whom he loved and cared for would satisfy him; also that working with all his might for the future good of his child, for the wellbeing and better care of the many who by their labours contributed to the Davenel wealth, would be most congenial occupation for that large brain and larger heart.

Yes, I must and did wish his return, his acceptance of the agency, whether or no it brought me happiness! I think that was the most difficult day of my life. I could settle to nothing. It was so hard to talk the pleasant nothings and commonplaces which were as usual expected from me.

Mrs. Davenel was more silent than ordinary,

her voice cold and almost harsh ; she rarely spoke to me, and avoided looking at me. She seemed gone back to her old nature. My heart died within me as I repeated "there is no hope," over and over again so that I might prevent myself hoping. The old rest and peace were gone, the old impulsive Muriel was waiting in a frenzy of expectation, though she tried to still herself by saying deep down within herself—"No hope."

Night came, but I could not sleep. The next morning Mr. Davenel noticed my paleness and feared I was ill, but I laughed and jested away his kindly comments. I once looked at Mrs. Davenel. She also must have watched and wept through the night, the eyes were so sunken, the face so pitifully sad and drawn. Whatever decision she had come to she had suffered in the forming it.

When breakfast was over she called me to her room, and, as was often the case now, asked me to do some small things for her, for I had become quite like a daughter of the house, and took my full share in all the tiny interests accompanying it. Then, not looking at me, but keeping her eyes bent on her work, she said gently:

"Muriel, Mr. Davenel and I have thought much

over this affair of the agency, and we are going to write to-day to offer the post to Faulkner Stewart. Do you think he will accept it? "

I could not answer. I had so schooled myself into the belief that this thing would not be granted to me, that the revulsion was almost more than I could bear. She looked up, and seeing how agitated I was, forbore to press for a reply.

"I think though he will," she continued, while a sad pathetic smile played round her lips, and shone from her beautiful eyes. "It will be what he will wish, for many reasons, and he is very suited for it."

"Yes," I answered with difficulty; then feeling her goodness and generosity to the heart's core, I strove to say more. "It is just what he would like—at least I think so; and he will be very glad to be near Kitty and you all again."

"Muriel," said Mrs. Davenel, losing her calmness as she spoke, "Horace would like me to do this, I am sure. I do it for his sake, and next to him for yours, my love. I had a sore battle within myself last night, and it all seemed impossible to me, till on my knees I fought

it out, and then God helped me. I cannot tell whether this will bring happiness into your life; it may not, but I think it will, and if it does you deserve it. You gave up much to my son, you were going to give up your whole life to him. It is not much that I, his mother, am trying to do for you in return. Yesterday I suffered horribly, when for a time I returned to my old selfishness, when I wished that you should go on mourning for my boy, as I must do, to the end. But God showed me my fault at last—showed me it was right that you should be happy once more, and told me if I could help towards it, I must. I have been so much more at peace within myself since I have decided this. I think that in the future I shall be happier now; for my happiness now will be in seeing others happy.”

I will not repeat more that she then said. I stayed some time with her, and when I left her, I felt how inexpressibly dear this woman, whom I once so disliked, had now become to me. I am sure she was brighter after this than she had ever been before. She was so pleased to see her

husband's delight in the proposed arrangement, and she now let herself realize to the full, what a rest and relief it would be if Mr. Stewart accepted the offer.

CHAPTER X.

THE END.

KITTY and I left for Durnford two days after my conversation with Mrs. Davenel. My parting with her was unusually affectionate, and her last words were: "I will let you and Kitty know of Faulkner's decision as soon as we hear it."

Lottie's wedding was a pretty bright-looking affair, the beauty of the bride and of the lovely children who followed her to the altar were beyond the ordinary in effect and grace. It was my wish there should be no grown-up bridesmaids. I put it on the plea that it would be a much more charming wedding with only pretty children for the bride's attendants; but I am afraid there was some selfishness mixed up with my persuasions, as I was thereby only a quiet

looker-on, which was far more to my taste than taking a more active part.

Mr. Estcourt was a pleasant man. I had not met him before, but liked the little I could see of him in the few days of bustle which preceded the marriage. He was not quite free from the somewhat barrister fault of being too argumentative; but it is perhaps a little difficult to slip off in private the armour which must so often be worn in public. Lottie however was exceedingly proud of his quick repartee, his readiness in finding out and holding up to public view the weak point in his enemy's harness, and the clever way in which he could turn and twist things so as to make wrong seem right, and vice versa.

I thought, so long as they never took to arguing with each other, it would be all right, but in their present beatific and slightly inane condition, they were, luckily for them, very far from such a contradictory state of things.

After the happy pair had left us, my mother, Kitty, and I were a very quiet but very contented trio at Durnford. We had little or no news from the outer world to disturb us.

I had feared lest Mr. Stewart should shrink from the very heavy responsibility which would attach to

him as agent; and, indeed, one or two letters did pass between him and Mr. Davenel before he finally accepted the post.

I neither heard from him, nor did I write to him during all this time. I wondered at his silence, but it was not for me to break it.

At last we heard he was to be in England by the end of February, so we sent Kitty home under safe escort, that she might be there to greet her father. I could not accompany her, for my mother was ill, not dangerously so, but still ill enough for me not to like to leave her. I was glad of this, for a curious nervousness had taken hold of me.

I shrank from that first meeting at The Chase, and preferred its being postponed. I did not know how things might be. Though each letter had spoken more and more eloquently of his interest in me, of his longings that we could have some more of our old talks, etc., still he might be altered from what he was, or rather in what he felt. More than two years had passed since we had spoken unreservedly to one another, and two years is a long time. I dreaded, too, lest he should find a change in me. I was so much graver within myself, that he,

missing my former liveliness, might be disappointed in me.

If I could have chosen, I would rather have met him first in my cottage home, with only my dear mother near me, but this was not likely to be. Any way, I was glad of the delay in seeing him, and the more so as he no longer seemed to care to write to, or to hear from me.

He was now in England, and had been at The Chase for some days. I had rapturous letters from Kitty, full of her happiness and longing for me to be with her; but they contained no message from him. I had kind epistles from Mrs. Davenel telling of the great relief it was to her and to her husband to be able to hand over the management of the business to Mr. Stewart, and to feel how fully they could trust him. She also said I was much wanted at "home," as she phrased it, and must come, and bring my mother with me, as soon as I could; but still there was no letter or message from him.

I began to feel very pained, and almost rejoiced that my mother's progress towards convalescence was still so slow, that much time must yet elapse before we had to go north.

Three weeks had now passed since Mr. Stewart's

return, and the middle of March was on us, with its icy winds and hot sun. I was alone one afternoon in our wee drawing-room; the preceding day had been a by ordinary storm of fierce raging wind, which had torn old and venerable trees up by their roots, had strewn the roads and Common with wreckage, in the way of branches, tiles, chimney-pots, and other fly-away articles, and which I knew must have made my beloved sea in Northshire most wonderfully grand to behold.

To-day the air without was repenting in sulky stillness for its yesterday's vehemence, and its repentance took the form of a most un-Marchlike fog, which brooded over the landscape in cold vaporous clouds. I had decided I would not go out; indeed there was small temptation to do so. My mother, who was now downstairs again, had gone to her own room for an hour or two, to rest away an obstinate headache, and I, drawing my chair close to the fire, resolved on finishing a very stiff yet effective piece of art needlework for Anastasia's drawing-room.

I was feeling very depressed. It was a relief to be by myself, to let my work fall on my lap, and to give myself up to gloomy, perhaps morbid, fancies.

Surely we all of us have had moments like these, when, not allowing ourselves to analyze the special cause or root of our bitterness, we yet give ourselves up to a general *malaise*, to a general grumble all round. This was my mood just now, and I was all the more unhappy because I tried not to acknowledge to myself what it was which was fretting me so sorely.

I heard the door open, and Sally, our old maid, announced some name or other in her usual inaudible voice. I turned wearily, I am afraid almost crossly, to greet as I supposed some most unwished-for visitor, when there, standing at the door, was Faulkner Stewart!

We looked at one another for a minute, neither of us moving nor speaking. Then he hurried towards me with both hands outstretched, taking mine into his, and by-and-by he took more than my hands; so, with scarcely a word spoken on either side, all was clear between us. There was no need of explanation, we understood each other now and for ever.

I have said much, perhaps too much, in this history of these three years of my life, about my own griefs and troubles, and now that it is happiness which has

come to me I am dumb. "A stranger intermeddled not with one's joy!" How true that is! I could not bring myself to tell to any human being what Faulkner Stewart and I said or thought in that first happy hour of reunion. It was a very perfect meeting. There seemed no alloy in it anywhere. We did not speak very much. We were together, and that one blessed fact was enough for us just then.

It seemed as if he had been only ten minutes with me, though many many ten minutes had really passed, when mother entered the room, quite unknowing of the male visitor who had invaded our quiet home. She came in, saying placidly:

"I do think, Muriel, your suggestion of my lying down has done my head——" And then she stopped very abruptly when she saw the dark head in the big arm-chair, and I so suspiciously near it.

I jumped up. I could not even face mother at that moment.

"You must tell her, please," I whispered, and flew out of the room and up to my own.

I have heard it said there is no such thing as perfect happiness here below. I do not believe this. In that half-hour when I paced up and down my

own sanctum, I was perfectly happy; absolute content filled my soul; a bewilderment of joy came into my heart. There was no drawback anywhere—it was perfect happiness. But I will concede this much to the pessimist view, which would rob bliss of its complete proportions—I will concede this much, that happiness in this world does not, cannot last: that this plenitude of joy is but for a short while, and in its want of durability shows it is only of mortal tenure. The happiness hereafter will be, I suppose, the real perfection, for it will be for ever.

Even to me, in that brightest hour of my life, came the reaction, came thought. Presently, outside my own ecstasy, I heard the hum of voices in the room beneath me, those dear voices talking no doubt of me, as my mother's easy consent was being won to my engagement.

My engagement! Ah, the second one in my short life! And the memory of the first now came back to me. Straightway joy was tinged with regret, pleasure with pain.

I thought of Horace Davenel, who had been so much in my life, who had loved me so; whose noble efforts to save me for this very bliss which had now

come to me, had almost won my love when he was dying, had certainly won my life-long affection for him. And as I thought of him, as the past rose vividly before me, a strange revulsion of feeling came to me, and I wept passionately for him. I sorrowed that so it must ever be in life, that some must suffer while others rejoice. I felt as if I were selfish to be so glad, when my gladness came through his death, when I knew it was purchased at such a price. I thought too of his mother, and of what she would feel when she heard my news. And then I remembered her kind unselfish words, remembered also how Horace himself had at the last wished this, which had now come to me, and I let myself once more be happy; nay, I could not prevent myself being so, only now the too great intoxication of delight had passed away, and I was calmer and more restful in my great joy.

A knock came to the door, and Sally poked in her head with vivid old-maid curiosity stamped on her every feature. She had formed her suspicions already, with the natural acuteness of her class, and wished to see how I was comporting myself on the occasion. "My mistress"—Sally was of the good old-fashioned school, and always called mother "my

mistress"—“begs me to tell you tea is ready, and you must go down. The strange gentleman is still there, Miss Muriel; he does pay long visits, surely. Is he going to stay to supper, and am I to get the spare room ready?”

“I am sure I don’t know, Sally,” I said, flushing under her inquisitorial gaze, and was turning to leave the room, when I saw a half-pathetic, wholly inquiring look on Sally’s puckered-up face; and remembering her faithful love of so many years, I resolved she should not remain any longer ignorant of that which she was so dying to know. I ran back to her, seized her round the neck, kissed her, and whispered: “Sally, I am so happy, but don’t talk of it to anyone,” and then I darted from her and downstairs as fast as I could, leaving our old servant standing quite still in the middle of my chamber, with eyes and hands uplifted, like a sort of domestic mediæval saint, her whole attitude one embodiment of wonder, love, and praise.

I stepped softly into the drawing-room, now quite dark, save for the pretty light of the fire, and there sat, in a full conclave of two, the people whom I loved the most in the world.

I went and took my place between them, and they,

seeing the usually too-talkative Muriel would fain be silent now, talked for me.

Much had already been settled both at The Chase and here. Everybody seemed to have taken my life into their hands just that they might fill it with happiness. Mr. Stewart, or rather Faulkner, as, under threat of severest penalty, I had now to call him, was only waiting the issue of this present visit to Durnford, to take a pretty little country home very near The Chase, and in the midst of his future work.

"I think you will like it, Muriel," he said, "for once, ages ago, when you and I and Kitty were riding near it, you said what a sweet homely place it looked, and that you thought the people who lived in it must be happy. Do you consent to my taking it, and shall we be the people who must be happy in it? The Davenels are very anxious about it, for then we shall be so near them."

"You must mean Gayford Lodge," I said. "I know it has been to let for some months past. How wonderful it seems that you should take it and live there! It will just suit you."

"Thanks for the solitary arrangement you plan so comfortably," he laughed. "When will you learn to say *we*, you shy child you?"

I could have told him that I had said *we* in my heart for a very long time past; I could also have told him that if he had proposed some two-roomed cottage to live in, instead of elegant refined Gayford Lodge, I would equally have been satisfied then, when I wanted just no more than the sight of his dear face, the sound of his dear voice. I went on listening as in a dream, while they—my mother and he—took quiet possession of me and my life. My dear unselfish mother had already yielded that it should not be a long engagement.

"We have waited long enough," said the master of my destiny. "I was getting almost weary of my unselfishness out in Canada. I was longing to make you and the child come to me there, only I felt how cruel it was to take you away from the old people, at any rate just yet. So I was trying very hard to be patient; but as I read in each sweet letter of yours how every thought turned almost unconsciously to me, as mine did to you, it became day by day a more difficult task. Then came the offer of this agency; and when I accepted it I thought within myself: 'If Muriel is the Muriel she used to be, she will not let me wait long.'"

"Muriel is just the same Muriel she always was,"

I answered, in a low voice; "and her wish is to do as you wish."

We were both silent for a while after that; but, as mother had now left us alone, I seemed to have found my tongue again, as I asked:

"Why have you not written to me these two months past?"

"Once I knew I was coming home," he said, "I did not seem to wish to write. I could not put what I really wished to say in letters, and mere commonplaces no longer satisfied me."

"Your letters were never commonplaces," I remarked indignantly.

"Would you like to return to them then, instead of this?" he said mischievously.

"No, no!" I rejoined; "but you don't know what they have been to me all this time, and what a blank there was when they ceased coming; I almost thought you were forgetting me."

"I am very sorry," he observed penitently. "I believe, Muriel, letters are never quite the same to men as they are to women, or rather our faith does not need so much assurance as yours does. I had grown, love, to believe in you so implicitly, that if you had not written for a whole year, I might have been

anxious; but I should not have supposed you cared for me less because of your silence. If I had had the least idea my silence caused you pain, I would have sent you duodecimo volumes daily, rather than that you should have felt it."

"It was wrong of me to be so faithless," I said humbly; "but I do believe the assurance of faith needs more keeping up with us women than with you men. You see, our love is to us all and everything, and to you men it is only a part of the many things which come into your life; also, when one thinks of one's own failings and defects, it is so easy to believe that people can tire of one. I think women are in some ways humbler than men."

"Not women in general, sweet one," he replied, "but a few are;" and then he whispered to me words of praise and love which only made me feel the more ashamed that I had ever mistrusted him for a moment in my life. "I am glad you consent to its being so soon, I want you so much," he concluded.

"It shall be when you like," I answered; "only we must not do anything too hurriedly, because of Mrs. Davenel. Faulkner, forgive me, but I think so much of her and of the past."

"I understand," he said. "I saw in your eyes when you came down just now, that that gentle heart had had room in it for sorrow as well as joy; but indeed it is Mrs. Davenel's wish that it should be soon. She and I are better, truer friends now than we have ever been. She has so bravely overcome herself, that her noble nature seems now only to take delight in making others happy."

"I would almost sooner not go again to The Chase till—till——" I said, blushing and unable to finish the sentence.

"Because of her?" he answered. "I think you make a mistake there."

"Perhaps I do," I replied. "But you do not, you cannot know as I do, what she has suffered and what it must be to her at first to see our happiness, knowing that he, her darling, is gone from her, and that it is because he is gone that we are able to be happy. Do you know, Faulkner, it almost seems to me as if mingled with my joy, with my unutterable content, was renewed sorrow for him. You must not mind my feeling thus, you have always had the best, you know; but it was so sad at last. I could never tell you till now, no one knows it save myself, that he died to save me for

you, that in almost his last words he told me to tell you this, 'that he wished our happiness.' I feel so unworthy of such great love as his, and of the love you too give me."

I could not speak more, and I saw he was almost as touched as I was. Nor was our love for each other less because deep down in my heart and in his also was a tender loving remembrance of poor Horace Davenel, which would abide with us both for ever.

He agreed with me that the effort should be made to spare Mrs. Davenel the pain of seeing us till we were married; but she would not have it so, and insisted on our going to The Chase as soon as my mother could bear the journey.

Surely I need not write more now. The story of those three years of my life is ended, and much time has passed since that cold foggy March day which brought such joy to me. Muriel Stewart—happy contented Muriel Stewart—has nothing but what is commonplace—at least, what seems so in the eyes of the outer world—to record of her life.

My mother retains her wee cottage at Durnford, with that love of independence which makes her society

so much more eagerly cared for, just perhaps because she does not always wish to give it. She is always a welcome longed-for guest with her two sons-in-law, for she is loved, appreciated, and valued, as indeed most mothers-in-law would be, if they would only follow her wise non-intervention policy.

Kitty, whose education has long ago passed out of my busy hands into other and more superior guiding, spends her time between her father's home and her other home at The Chase. She is a lovely girl, and full of sweet womanly intelligence, and is as a very sunbeam in the two houses. The only quarrel I, her stepmother, ever have with her, is when she will over-spoil my two darlings, to whom she is only second in my affections.

Mr. Estcourt and Lottie sometimes spend their holidays with us. He is becoming more and more the busy barrister, the combined effects of the inevitable wig and the hard mental labour thinning his hair, till Lottie groans and says: "If I could only have foreseen how bald he was going to be, I would never, never, never——" But I think she would all the same, even if he had developed twenty foreheads instead of only the two which are now on his head.

They have moved into a larger house, and live up to the utmost of their income. Lottie is growing stout, but is always a handsome stately woman, and is become very fashionable, yet finds plenty of time to devote to her three little girls; who are another grievance, being, as she says, of the wrong sex, though she gives them none the less love for that.

The Fearons are childless—a source of regret to him, when he has time to think of it; but she is quite content—he is the sun of her hemisphere, and she wishes for no rival luminaries.

I now come to the dwellers in The Chase. Mr. Davenel, in his kindly cheeriness, has developed into the brightest, happiest old man I ever saw. It is a golden old age with him—an old age of love and good works and kindly thoughts for others. He and his wife are seldom seen apart. She, in her gentle gravity and earnest thoughtfulness, seems only to live for him and her other dear ones; but I, who know her so well, know that her real, deepest nature is never with us—that it is with the greatest treasure of her life; that she is always quietly waiting, waiting till in God's own time she sees her darling once more—sees him in that

perfect union of heart, and soul, and thought which can only come when the mortal has put on immortality, when in God's presence and with His light shining round us, with sin for ever banished from us, we can love each other perfectly and without alloy for evermore.

And now I suppose I must just say a word or two about my husband and myself. We are very happy, even though—as there must be in all human relations—there is sometimes need to bear and forbear; but our love is founded on a rock—the rock of absolute trust and faith in each other. There is no shadow of wrong in the past to taint the present. We have striven to do right, and so there is no past bitterness to come between us, to mar the true union there is in our lives.

We are very busy people; I throw myself with all the strength of my perhaps too energetic nature into his life, as far as he will let me, or as far as it is suitable; for I maintain that woman's work is best done by woman, and man's by man, and the attempt to blend the two can only result in failure. But still there are countless ways in which I think he needs me. My home work, the care

of my children, my dear Kitty, her grandparents, and my own mother draw largely on my life and thoughts, but all the rest I give to him who is my other better self.

Sometimes leaving mother in charge of the bairns, Faulkner and I "elope from home," as we phrase it, and either have a real lazy holiday in some foreign parts, or else go among the mining districts, which, as I said before, form so large a portion of the Davenel property. There we, for a while, live near the rough people, he with the men, I with the women, using that strongest of all influences, personal influence, to draw them from evil, to win them to better, purer lives. It is, as we say, the most earnest part of our own lives, these efforts for their good. And though we often meet with cruel disappointment, though it is often one step forward and two backward, still bit by bit we win our way, and feel, however feebly and humbly it may be, that we are doing God's work in the world.

So, my life is passing on in full content, in God-given peace. I do not see the future; it is perhaps mercifully veiled from me; but I know this—that whatever may be coming to us, whether of joy or

sorrow, my daily prayer is that my husband and I may be enabled to meet our lives bravely and hopefully, strong in each other's love, and stronger still in our faith in God.

THE END.





